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You Spin Me Right Round (Like a Record)

—Or, Does the Assessment Loop Ever Truly “Close”?

Iris Jahng, University of Massachusetts Boston

DEPARTMENTAL LEARNING GOALS are part of the University of Massachusetts Boston's (UMass Boston) strategic plan to examine student progress and assess student learning. Many academic departments, including English and sociology, have explicitly incorporated information literacy into their student learning goals. English (ENGL) 102 is an integral part of the freshman writing curriculum and addresses skills needed to satisfy the institution's Writing Proficiency Requirement, which undergraduate students must pass in order to graduate. Students learn to write research-based essays and connect research to the writing process in ENGL 102, making it an ideal candidate for a course-embedded assessment of the impact of information literacy instruction on student learning. This work has already been impactful at many levels: within the library, on campus, and between UMass Boston and other institutions.

Project: Everything Is Cool When You're Part of Team (UMass Boston and Team AiA)

Librarians, English faculty, an institutional researcher, and a sociologist (Team AiA) partnered to participate in Assessment in Action's (AiA) 2015–16 cohort and embark on a collaborative assessment of student learning in the second composition course, ENGL 102, for first-year students. Our primary inquiry question was this: How does research instruction impact students' ability to transfer research skills from one project to the next? Our secondary exploratory query was this: Is there an interest in co-taught or librarian-supported, faculty-led research instruction classes? While this was always a question we were interested in exploring, we saw that we could pursue this second aspect when we realized that we had a mix of participating faculty who wanted entirely librarian-led instruction, faculty who wanted to handle the instruction themselves, and faculty who preferred a “hybrid” model where both librarians and faculty handled different pieces of the instruction.

We were interested in assessing whether undergraduate students enrolled in participating ENGL 102 sections

- understood the difference between looking up information online and conducting sustained, in-depth research on a topic
- used keywords, subject language, and controlled vocabulary to search for and access information on their paper topics
- understood how to handle conflicts between what they found and what they wanted to research, or avoiding “cherry-picking”

We were able to look into our additional query because participating faculty teaching ENGL 102 agreed to the following instructional models:

- seven professors (fourteen sections): librarian-led instruction
- one professor (four sections): solo faculty-led instruction
- two professors (six sections): hybrid (both faculty- and librarian-led) instruction

Team AiA's project demonstrated some of the benefits of integrating writing and research (information literacy) instruction while showing that librarians and English faculty are natural partners in accomplishing this. It also highlighted the library instruction program's contributions to student learning and established librarians as potential collaborators in future student learning assessment efforts. Through this project, we gained a clearer picture of the impact of information literacy instruction on student success. This finding is important because UMass Boston has over 16,000 students and five instruction librarians as of spring 2017, and the scalability of our instruction program is a very real concern. Instruction librarians taught 562 classes in 2016 and 447 classes in 2017; given this immense workload, it is important to measure our impact on student learning and success so that we can improve our instruction program and our individual efforts.

Our findings included but were not limited to the following:

- Students understood and appreciated the ways they could use library resources to research their paper topics and access credible sources.
- The value in collaborating to assess student learning outcomes extends beyond one project and one department.
- Information literacy instruction doesn't necessarily require a librarian in the classroom.

Because of AiA, we are now more confident in designing information literacy instruction sessions with built-in assessments. We continue to collaborate with the English department by expanding our focus to all ENGL courses and by piloting a new instructional model that breaks information literacy instruction into smaller chunks and encourages faculty to assume responsibility for teaching more components themselves. That way more students enrolled in ENGL courses benefit from information literacy instruction, and the reduced amount of time a librarian spends in the classroom makes the project scalable, enabling the embedding of information literacy instruction throughout ENGL courses and the major.

Our project is built on work that librarians have been doing with the sociology department and serves as a successful model for future collaborative assessment efforts. Since the sociology department has a learning goal dedicated to information literacy (students will know "how to access and evaluate scholarly sources"), librarians have been working with sociology faculty to assess whether students can identify, access, cite, and evaluate scholarly sources. We invited a sociology faculty member to join Team AiA because we wanted her to serve as a bridge between our first collaborative assessment of student learning and the one that Team AiA was attempting, sharing valuable insights and lessons learned. The English department also has a learning goal addressing information literacy ("Build students' inquiry and research abilities by encouraging them to work with both primary and secondary source material, develop research methods using library and database resources, connect research to the writing process, and practice the skills of organizing, developing, and supporting research-based arguments"), so AiA seemed like a natural opportunity to bring faculty from different departments together to work on a shared interest. Librarians will continue this work with the English department and the Composition Program, exploring and assessing different ways we can work together to further facilitate student learning and success.

Post-project: Here Comes the Sun (Team AiA Debrief)

After the spring semester ended in May 2016, Team AiA met in the library to discuss our findings, explore next steps and future possibilities, and just share problems and issues and workshop ideas and solutions for assessing student learning with other like-minded campus colleagues. What was originally slated to be a one-hour meeting stretched into nearly three hours of nonstop discussion about student learning assessment. The exciting thing about this debrief was that the library was responsible for bringing faculty across departments together to talk about their shared interest in assessing student learning. They talked about their experiences with different classes and sets of students and asked for advice on how to do things better next time. I would have ended the meeting earlier if the conversation hadn't taken on a life of its own, and if the attendees weren't so clearly engaged in what they were talking about and so excited to be talking to others who were similarly enthusiastic about assessment.

In addition to bringing together a team of people with shared interests, our AiA project has given faculty a greater appreciation for what librarians offer as educators and as partners, impacted the way we think about our instructional program within the library, and opened up potential new avenues for further librarian-faculty collaboration.

One benefit of working so closely with teaching faculty in the design and execution of a collaborative assessment project was that the faculty gained a better understanding of what librarians do and how we approach our work. We were fortunate that the English department chair was a member of Team AiA, and that the newly hired director of the Composition Program volunteered her ENGL 102 students to participate in our project. Our efforts in creating a lesson plan and materials that represented the interests, values, and goals of both teaching faculty and librarians paid off almost immediately, when the program director flipped through the booklet all students in participating ENGL 102 sections completed during their scheduled library instruction sessions and exclaimed excitedly, "I love how much reflection and transfer are emphasized!"

Reflection was consciously built into the entire lesson plan. It was there in the very first minutes of class, when students reflected on their assignment and research topic, what they were hoping to discover about their topic, and the questions they were hoping to answer through the research process. Research was presented not as a tedious activity that students had to do in order to write their final paper, but as an opportunity to really explore their topics and find what about the topics they found truly fascinating. After students had time to explore two databases and find some interesting articles and books, they were asked to identify the *best* source they found, briefly summarize it, describe how they were thinking about using it in their paper, and provide a representative quote. This set of questions was borrowed from an English faculty member on Team AiA, as it is something he regularly asks his ENGL 102 students to work through to help them evaluate the sources they find. Since it directly addresses source evaluation, we dedicated time toward the end of class for students to do this important work. This easy, seamless integration of instructional materials provided by librarians and by faculty further demonstrated that we are natural partners when it comes to promoting student learning and success. Finally, at the end of class, students reflected on the most interesting thing they discovered about their research topics, their understanding of the differences among the databases they used to explore their topics, and how their initial thoughts about their research topics had changed. While very few students were able to address the last batch of reflective questions at the end of class, the answers we received revealed that these students were able to see that databases largely differed in terms of subject coverage and interface design and that their preferences for one database over another often boiled down to things like aesthetic preferences or previous experience with one over the other.

Within the library, we had staff discussion about shifting to an instructional model where librarians spend less time in the classroom and instead focus their efforts toward “training the trainers”: instead of instructing students, librarians would instruct teaching faculty and empower them to handle information literacy instruction. Fortunately, Team AiA’s efforts paid off, as the English department chair saw not only the dedication of the instruction librarians at UMass Boston, but also how few of us there are to accomplish this type of embedded work. On top of our AiA instruction sessions, all instruction librarians taught additional instruction sessions, which resulted in a heavy teaching load during the spring 2016 semester.

It quickly became clear to the English department chair that having librarians meet with individual English classes was an unsustainable approach to ensuring that more students enrolled in English courses would benefit from information literacy instruction; one possible solution we approached was having librarians work with teaching faculty behind the scenes to prepare lesson plans, instructional materials, and handouts and help build up faculty members’ confidence that this was something they were capable of doing themselves. Bolstering this idea was the fact that I had discovered (via personal communication with several ENGL 102 instructors) that they were already teaching their students research skills without librarian assistance. One faculty member actually used our AiA instructional materials as a benchmark to evaluate how well he was teaching his students—and when he told me this, I was excited by this discovery. This seemed to indicate that it wouldn’t be too terribly difficult to identify more faculty that were either doing something similar already or could be persuaded to try it out themselves.

Post-post-project: Ch-ch-ch-changes (in the Classroom Directly Influenced by AiA)

One idea that English faculty introduced early and often throughout the course of our team’s work was that of knowledge transfer. They wanted students to realize that the research skills they developed and sharpened as a result of research instruction were not only applicable to their research paper assignment in ENGL 102, but were also relevant to their assignments and projects in other classes and contexts. This emphasis on knowledge transfer has already transformed one aspect of my own teaching (and some of my colleagues’, as well): in the classes I now teach, students are directly told that if they’re comfortable using or searching one database, then they are capable of successfully using ANY database; while interfaces change, the way you search does not. Knowledge transfer can occur at many different levels, that is, between classes, assignments, and even tools.

Students are now explicitly encouraged to try using their search terms in several databases to see for themselves that the way they brainstorm keywords, connect them with Boolean operators, and use limiters to filter and refine their search results are not database-specific; rather, they are things they should be doing everywhere they go. All databases were designed as research tools, and because of this, all of their features are there because they will help you do your work more efficiently and effectively. While we look forward to formal assessment, it appears that students are now more comfortable exploring multiple different databases without having to be introduced to them by their professor or a librarian. For example, a demonstration of how search results are changed by adding additional keywords in a database such as Academic Search Complete might now be followed by trying that precise combination of keywords in a second database such as ProQuest Central, JSTOR, or ScienceDirect. After seeing a librarian do this, students seem more willing to try searching multiple databases using their own sets of keywords.

This past academic year, we have observed more students having multiple databases open in different tabs and their apparently growing comfort at exploring new databases and unfamiliar interfaces. While this change is small, it is a real change directly resulting from our involvement and close collaboration with the English faculty on Team AiA. Professors frequently nod along approvingly when students learn that interfaces change but the way they search does not, and more students appear to attempt to search more databases. This is but one small example of how AiA has led to increased understanding for both faculty and librarians: faculty have a clearer view of how their students benefit from library instruction and a deeper appreciation for the expertise of librarians, and librarians are discovering new facets of the impact they have on the student learning that occurs in ENGL 102.

Post-post-project: With a Little Help from My Friends (Relationship Building)

Additional opportunities for librarian-faculty collaboration point to the impact of AiA at UMass Boston. Composition Program faculty met on January 19, 2017, to plan for the upcoming spring semester; I was invited by the program director to attend the meeting and introduce myself and the library's information literacy instruction program, discuss what we learned as a result of our departments' AiA collaboration, and introduce the library's assessment projects and recruit interested faculty to participate. This was an ideal opening to build on the work we began with AiA and further strengthen the library's already-strong relationships with the English department and the Composition Program. Even though this was the first faculty meeting I had been invited to at UMass Boston, I wasn't as nervous as I thought I would be. Team AiA's findings were still fresh in my mind, and I was excited to talk to our composition faculty about our shared successes and to discuss the various ways we could continue working together.

After consulting with my fellow librarians, we decided to promote the following initiatives: our growing collection of asynchronous instructional materials that faculty could incorporate into their own teaching (and offer up librarians as information literacy consultants); our development of lesson plans and an information literacy curriculum specifically geared toward the needs of ESL, ELL, and international students; and a cross-institutional collaboration between UMass Boston and some of our biggest feeder community colleges to measure students' information literacy and identify gaps that instruction librarians could then address both at the community college level and also when the students transfer into UMass Boston. This last initiative began as a discussion at ACRL New England's AiA Symposium on September 13, 2016, at Assumption College between Cecilia Sirigos, Team AiA's research design and resident statistics expert librarian, and a librarian from Massasoit Community College, which happens to be one of UMass Boston's biggest feeder schools. In my opinion, this growing collaboration is the most exciting thing to come as a result of AiA, as it has the potential to empower the library to contribute to ongoing student retention efforts here at UMass Boston, since many of the participating community colleges are our feeder schools.

Just as we expected, composition faculty were excited to hear about our assessment initiatives, and there was great enthusiasm and willingness to participate. After the meeting, librarians contacted interested faculty members to let them know more about our ongoing projects and what their involvement in them would entail. I contacted fifteen faculty members about our attempt to shift our instructional program away from heavy reliance on librarian presence in the classroom and toward librarians acting more as instructional consultants. I knew that this would go over well with our composition faculty because we discovered through our work for AiA that there are a

number of faculty who don't schedule instruction sessions with a librarian, but are instead handling this themselves (with varying levels of confidence in their ability to do this successfully). Thus, we knew that an opportunity exists to offer our instructional expertise in a new form to teaching faculty and that this would very likely be well-received since it was compatible with what they were already doing.

While the library would like to shift our instructional program toward a model where librarians act as information literacy consultants to teaching faculty, and there already exists space for us to do so, I didn't want to push the idea onto our faculty too hard. Although a sizable number of faculty are already assuming responsibility for teaching this material to their students, many faculty members also truly value what librarians bring into their classrooms, our expertise, and the effect of our instruction on their students. Therefore, while I truly believe that this model is the future of the library's instruction program, I didn't want faculty to feel as if they were being pushed toward teaching it themselves before they were necessarily ready to do so. Instead, it was presented as just one of several options and a show of the library's flexibility in how we can partner with faculty toward our shared goal of student success. This desired shift in our instructional program is a significant impact of AiA and constitutes one way we're using our findings to inform librarians' future instructional collaborations, and faculty buy-in is an essential ingredient for a successful transformation of library instruction at UMass Boston.

My gentle "Hey, I know you are doing this already and we'd love to help you in whatever ways you'll find most beneficial" approach to introducing the library's information literacy instruction program and the various models we have for partnering with faculty has generated some initial movement. Of the fifteen faculty members I contacted to discuss our asynchronous instructional materials addressing many different aspects of information literacy, I heard back from four: two faculty members who did not schedule library instruction sessions, one faculty member teaching four ENGL 102 sections that my colleague Cecilia (from Team AiA) and I worked with in fall 2016, and one faculty member with whom I regularly work each semester. I don't know how the first three faculty members incorporated our asynchronous materials into their teaching, but I do know that the fourth faculty member used our lessons on citing sources and plagiarism to facilitate in-class discussions with her students about the importance of acknowledging where their information comes from and why citations are taken so seriously in the academic community.

A steady, patient approach seems most likely to yield enduring changes to the library's information literacy instruction program and our faculty's receptiveness to assuming greater responsibility for the teaching and development of their students' information literacy—with librarians available to them as consultants, rather than as a physical presence in the classroom. During our work on AiA, librarians encountered multiple faculty members who had taken it upon themselves to instruct their students in research techniques and library resources, but lacked confidence in the strength of their instruction. By sharing instructional materials like lesson plans and handouts, talking about instructional methods and learning activities, and even teaching instruction sessions ourselves, we discovered that our composition faculty were on point with their own instructional efforts, and we were able to affirm and confirm that they were successfully instructing their students. This approval carried quite a bit of weight with faculty, as they regard librarians as the true experts in this domain. In fact, maybe the AiA hybrid instruction sessions can be regarded as a sort of "training wheels" for priming faculty to take the wheel, so to speak, and tackle information literacy instruction themselves.

In email communications after the composition faculty meeting, the program director was thankful for my making library-based research and information literacy instruction seem less

daunting to faculty and for letting them know of the various ways we can work together. I also learned that she is aware of the publications drawing parallels between writing studies threshold concepts and information literacy threshold concepts; this seems like another potentially fruitful avenue for continued conversations and future collaborations.

Conclusion: Wanna Be Startin' Somethin' (Wait, Isn't Assessment a Loop?)

Working on AiA was enormously beneficial in myriad ways: we learned about the impact of information literacy instruction on student learning; we strengthened the library's already-strong relationships with the English department and the Composition Program; we brought together people from various campus units over a shared interest in and commitment to assessment; and we established the library as a viable partner in future assessment efforts and as an active participant in creating a campus-wide "culture of assessment." I admit that while I am proud of my team's work and the outcomes of our efforts, it doesn't quite feel like we've truly "closed" any assessment loop that may have been initiated by our participation in AiA. This hands-on introduction to the world of assessment has me questioning whether a loop is the best metaphor for the assessment cycle, and if it ever truly comes full circle. Given my experiences, I now wonder if it makes more sense to think of assessment as more like a spiral, or if we should dispense with assessment metaphors and just focus on not losing momentum after we report out the results of an assessment project. Or, if we insist on keeping metaphors that address the circular motion, yet also incorporate the additional project offshoots and varying options for continuation, maybe ...an assessment hurricane?

What I am certain of, however, is that I can't wait to see what happens next. It'll be exciting to see what the future holds for the library's partnerships with the English department and the Composition Program, our cross-institutional collaborative assessment of students' information literacy, and our efforts to shift our information literacy instruction program to a "librarians as consultants" model.

Biography

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