

Evaluation is the Answer: Who, What, When, Where, Why and How are the Questions



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Assessment and evaluation are fluid concepts and, at times, used interchangeably. As general processes applied to understanding performance in any context – student, librarian/ professor or organizational – they can equally be viewed as positive and effective undertakings, or as onerous and inconclusive approaches to determining cause and effect. Regardless of one's views, effective teaching and learning cannot be understood without intentionally and consistently applied assessment and evaluation.

Assessment relates to knowing what the student can and can't do, and does and doesn't know (i.e., student performance). Evaluation relates to knowing what the teacher does and doesn't do well (i.e., teacher evaluation) and also, perhaps, to knowing what the organization (library or academic/administrative departments) does and doesn't do effectively at program, organizational and strategic performance levels.

This article focuses on evaluation as it applies to information literacy (IL) program performance in a university library setting.

Current program evaluation practice

At an organizational level, evaluation data are routinely collected, organized, analyzed and

then interpreted. However, in many cases the reality is that the results of evaluative processes are not then understood or reapplied to enhance learning outcomes. Organizations can also be faced with a disjunct between who needs the data and for what purposes. Administrators require certain types of information regarding IL programs but, if librarians are not involved in the conversations regarding the rationale and intended use, the input and output data gathered for reporting purposes might not be adequately collected or recorded. Even if the information is reliably collated and reported, librarians might need additional information or context to analyze and apply the results effectively, or to be in a position to influence change. Collectively, a collaborative approach toward data gathering and evaluation is more likely to meet the shared goal of enhanced student learning.

IL evaluation practices often mimic the evaluation strategies of the larger institution or library, such as applying quantitative measures (statistics) or qualitative strategies (surveys). Librarians typically record attendance for one-shot classes or credit-bearing courses, and articulate participation as an evaluative criterion for determining their effectiveness with a view to improving their

teaching and influencing student learning. However, while "routine" statistical evaluation is necessary in some circumstances, what is equally required is careful planning regarding what should be evaluated, why it should be evaluated, how it should be evaluated and by whom it should be evaluated. In all cases, a commitment is required to "close the loop" on the evaluation to improve the IL program and the teaching skills of librarians, and – ultimately – student learning.

Revisiting program evaluation

A logical place to start in program review is to intentionally document IL efforts of consequence. These may be classroom-based initiatives, broader faculty or discipline-related strategies, or practices applied at an organizational level. Some libraries may recognize as their IL measures sources of data such as use of online IL tutorials, contributions to first-year experience programs, involvement with general education requirements, and the creation or implementation of standardized grading rubrics. In all cases, the evaluation processes need to align with the context at hand; not all evaluative processes will be appropriate for all contexts.

For example, at the Augustana Campus Library of the University of

Alberta, program evaluation includes such indicators as student engagement in and results of the 21 credit-bearing IL courses, participation rates in the annual IL workshop, distribution of the IL DVD (*It Changed the Way I Do Research: Augustana Talks Information Literacy*), interest in and use of the open-source assessment software (WASSAIL), IL awards for teaching faculty and for students, and effectiveness of IL branding/marketing. In Australia, Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Library uses performance indicator methodologies to evaluate library program and teacher effectiveness (as student satisfaction) and faculty program evaluation (as effective curriculum design). Statistical IL data gathering and analysis by QUT Library serves as a primary method of informing ongoing resourcing, development and advocacy.

As all contexts are different, it is critical to understand and acknowledge the context and build on strengths and opportunities within that context. Bearing in mind established IL evaluation practices, it is important to consider future goals and objectives in light of educational changes and strategic planning. This process must engage all partners, including librarians, library administration, university administration and teaching faculty. Forward planning and evaluation redesign must then become a regular component of the programmatic IL evaluation process, with outcomes aligned with either new or existing frameworks to guide and inform the programmatic goals, planning and statement of outcomes.

Programmatic outcomes can include components such as the goal of the overall improvement of evaluation of librarian teaching and/or student satisfaction with their learning experiences. Frequently evaluation tools are developed without sufficient collaboration and discussion between stakeholders regarding the implementation of the evaluation processes and the desired outcomes. In isolation, it is difficult to create teaching evaluation tools of broad application. Collaboratively developed tools benefit from the breadth of experience and perspective that collective effort is more likely to provide.

The collaborative development, review and refinement of rubrics facilitates a more cohesive overall evaluation strategy and is an investment of time that can precipitate and enhance the reporting of more consistent and credible data. Evidence of improved student engagement as a result of the strategic reflection, analysis and implementation of teaching evaluation tools positively drives programmatic evaluation and development. At the University of Alberta's Augustana Campus Library, an environment conducive to constructive and critical thought and feedback is intentionally encouraged to create, implement and reflect on rubrics. These rubrics are developed to achieve standardized evaluation, and assumptions are presented and discussed from a variety of perspectives. No "less than perfect" rubric is considered a failure; all contribute to ongoing development of evaluation practices and professional perspective and, ultimately, librarian contribution to student learning.

Strategic evaluation practices

Intentional strategic application of evaluation practices and processes has the potential to maximize resources and extract greater gains from collective and individual efforts of staff at all levels. In this way, it might be assured that what is valued is being measured rather than measuring what is assumed to be valued. Effective evaluation is positioned to be embraced and success achieved in the presence of clear and consistent communication, a respectful working culture and a common understanding of and engagement in the institution's and the library's mission. Librarians can design and apply informed and effective evaluation practice in consideration of the "bigger picture" using consultative processes that assure appropriate directions in evaluation. Ultimately, this practice assures and substantiates an environment conducive to evidence-based decision making and development at the program and classroom levels.


Many institutions have embraced the significance of IL institutionally by creating an IL coordinator role. This facilitates mechanisms and opportunities for bigger picture planning and visioning for the library administration and librarians. Such a position facilitates a cohesive and managed consideration of relevant curricular components and documents and strategizes the library's place – including barriers and opportunities – in influencing curricular planning and decision making. Ideally this role collaborates closely with teaching faculty, department chairs and curriculum committees so the approach is fully, holistically and

strategically embedded into the curriculum.

Intentional strategic IL program evaluation positions collective IL efforts to more successfully meet and achieve student learning outcomes, encourages effective teaching practice, and addresses organizational accountability and performance measurement. QUT's creation of the Integrated Literacies Coordinator position demonstrates the institution's strong commitment to the implementation and evaluation of IL and academic literacy (academic/study skills) as a holistic contribution and approach to learning support for two related core graduate capabilities.

Closing comments

The question is not whether evaluation is necessary, but rather

the degree to which strategic and operational intelligence is applied to the planning and implementation of the evaluative processes. In addressing the issue of evaluation, consideration must be given to the breadth of the contexts and concepts. Evaluation done out of routine at the individual and/or organizational level in isolation of broader conversations and strategies will have limited relevance and application. Meaningful IL program evaluation that benefits all stakeholders is generated and matures within an environment where planning is collaborative, where mistakes are expected and used to inform change, and where the mission of the IL program is collectively determined and embraced. 

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