

Project Report

Reflection as a means to assess information literacy instruction

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Abstract

Teaching is integral to the mission and purpose of academic libraries, but in our institutions and professional organisations, the story of our teaching is often reduced to numbers: How many sessions? How many hours? How many students? Within this framework, quantity dictates success, with more classes, time, and students meaning more impact. Yet as teaching librarians, we know that the story of our work doesn't begin and end in the classroom. This project report outlines the development of a qualitative, reflection-based evaluative process and toolkit for our Libraries' instruction programme that centres two critical domains: teacher-librarian self-efficacy and student learning. The implementation of both process and toolkit provides readers a model for examining how well their values align with their own instruction assessment and how to evaluate their teaching programmes in more meaningful ways.

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Keywords

assessment; curriculum evaluation; evaluation; information literacy; reflective practice; student learning

1. Introduction

1.1 A Library Teaching Story

The Teaching & Learning Department within the University of Houston Libraries is responsible for library instruction and student success initiatives for undergraduate and graduate students across multiple disciplines. As librarians in this department, our work formally involves teaching information literacy (IL) sessions for classes and co-curricular programmes, developing relationships with faculty, students, and staff, and providing research consultations.

As we are certain that many of our fellow teaching librarians can attest, much of our work does not fall neatly into these categories. Further, there is a disconnect between what we do as teaching librarians and what others—faculty, students, even some of our libraries colleagues—may think we do. Many of us have been asked, at one point or another, to “teach students how to use the library,” often with a request for a variety of additional objectives that are difficult to fit within the (usually brief) requested timeframe. Of course, we do help students learn about the library during our class sessions, but we cannot help but consider how much more is involved in our work.

As an example, in 2023, two of this report's authors collaborated on an IL class session for an engineering technical writing class. Students' major assignment for the semester was to write a feasibility report for a fantastical scene or event depicted in a popular film. Students were asked to determine specific factors that would make the scene feasible, or not feasible, in real life. We had worked with this instructor on this class for numerous semesters, and we felt that we could improve upon our approach to teaching relevant IL concepts. We ultimately designed a collaborative activity to model the research process that the students would use for their own assignments.

During the class session, we watched a scene from the film *Up* in which a house floats into the sky on a cluster of balloons (Docter, 2009). We asked students to take notes on specific factors that would make the existence of such a flying house possible or impossible. We encouraged them to lean into curiosity rather than making immediate judgements about feasibility. The students were creative and thoughtful in their responses, raising questions around such topics as the cost of helium to fill the balloons, the structural integrity of the home, and the ability to effectively steer the house once airborne. From this point, we addressed how to use library resources and evaluate information sources to answer those questions.

In the preceding scenario, most of our time and effort as teaching librarians was spent designing and planning, rather than teaching in the classroom. Simultaneously, the only official record of this class in terms of assessment is a single entry in our library instruction tracking form: one workshop, 30 students, one hour and 15 minutes. These are important data points for institutional assessment, but we were struck by how little information they provide for teaching librarians seeking to assess and improve our practice.

Experiences like this led to our decision to rethink our departmental instruction assessment efforts beyond easily quantifiable metrics. In this report, we introduce a pilot project focussed on reflection-based assessment for librarian self-efficacy and student learning. We set the context for our project within the last 2 decades of assessment efforts in academic libraries and introduce our institutional context. We then describe our Reflective Assessment Toolkit creation process and its two-year pilot implementation. Our hope is that other instruction programmes in academic libraries can adopt a more reflective approach to student learning assessment and assessment of teacher-librarian self-efficacy.

1.2 Learning Assessment in Academic Libraries

Over the last 15 years, much of the student learning assessment literature from academic librarians in the United States (U.S.) has had a decidedly proof-of-value perspective. In 2010, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) published the *Value of Academic Libraries* report, which effectively set the agenda for assessment efforts in U.S. academic libraries for the next decade (Oakleaf, 2010). The purpose of this report was to emphasise the “articulation of library value to external audiences,” utilising assessment as a tool of proving the worth of the academic library to university administrators, accreditors, and funders (Oakleaf, 2010, p. 7). It was self-described as a “pragmatic approach” to assessment and characterised critical assessment efforts as “impractical” in the higher education landscape of the time (Oakleaf, 2010, p. 7). Yet in that same year, *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* was published, articulating much of the critical librarianship discourse taking place in academic libraries (Accardi et al., 2010). In the influential chapter, “Teaching Against the Grain,” Maria Accardi took direct aim at proof-of-value narratives of assessment as instruments of maintaining existing power structures in higher education (2010, p. 251). She advocated for critical assessment practices that centred student learning and empowerment, challenged power structures in academia, and facilitated the development of meaningful learning experiences (Accardi, 2010, p. 255–256). It was a strong critique of assessment-as-demonstration-of-value but did not have the professional association backing and support that the *Value of Academic Libraries* report had at the time.

The influence of the *Value of Academic Libraries* report continued into the 2010s, through the U.S. Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant-funded ACRL Assessment in Action (AiA) Programme. From 2013 to 2016, AiA furthered the ACRL *Value of Academic Libraries* initiative through year-long, cohort-based workshops in which librarians from over 200 academic institutions pursued assessment projects aimed at demonstrating their library’s direct impact on student learning and success (Association of College and Research Libraries, n.d.a). These projects were shared via multiple grant-reports and resulted in many assessment-focused conference presentations, posters, scholarly articles, and books (Association of College and Research Libraries, n.d.b). These were often research projects that demonstrated correlational relationships between library instruction, library use, and student learning outcomes in coursework, GPAs, and general education courses (ACRL, n.d.b). However, they were murkily characterised as causal relationships between libraries and student success that justified and defended the existence of the academic library (Robertshaw & Asher, 2019). Results from the third-year project report claimed that library use increased academic student success, library research consultations boosted student GPAs and grades, and library instruction resulted in better general education learning outcomes (Brown & Malenfant, 2017). These projects often, although not exclusively, relied on quantitative data tied to learning analytics, instruction statistics, circulation numbers and gate counts, and quantitative learning

assessment methods like pre- and post-test scores, rubric scores, grades, and GPAs. This kind of data is—if not easy—much simpler to collect, but it does not paint a complete picture of the work of libraries or the way the university community interacts with the library and the people who work in it. Overall, the emphasis of the AiA program was on the practice of assessment to acquire symbolic capital, or proof of worthiness, within a neoliberal academic context.

Librarians continued to push back against the monopolisation of proof-of-value assessment. Like Accardi before them, Ebony Magnus, Jackie Belander, and Maggie Faber proposed a more person-centred view of assessment in *Towards a Critical Assessment Practice* (2018). They advocated for an interrogation of all aspects of assessment processes, encouraging librarians to ask: What are the questions we really want to find answers to, as opposed to the questions that are easy to answer? Who and/or what matters to our work and in our academic context? How can we develop assessment methods with our communities to meet their needs? This was a timely exploration of our values as librarians as applied to assessment. Additionally, a meta-analysis of library learning analytics studies served as a wake-up call to proof-of-value assessment (Robertshaw & Asher, 2019). Robertshaw and Asher argued that in foregrounding impact as the ultimate output of assessment, librarians have made methodological leaps to connect libraries to student success and put students' privacy at risk. In the studies they reviewed, researchers had neglected to consider statistical effect sizes and at times used weak correlational and regression values in pursuit of library impact (Robertshaw & Asher, 2019).

Yet the lure of quantitative assessment and its promise of speaking to funders and administrators persisted. In 2019 ACRL released Project Outcome, based on the Public Library Association project of the same name (ORS Impact, 2017). Project Outcome provides academic librarians with a bank of deployable surveys that are used to "illustrate the benefits of library services to users and stakeholders" in multiple areas (ACRL, 2024; Ackermann et al., 2018). The surveys with greatest usage are focused on student perceptions of the usefulness of library instruction rather than student learning. When coupled with the use of AI to ingest and summarise large amounts of assessment or student satisfaction qualitative data, proving library worth to stakeholders is clearly a continuing priority in academia (González-Calatayud et al., 2021). Within an increasingly neoliberal U.S. higher education landscape there will always be a need for administrative statistics and competition for funding; however, we argue that academic libraries have over-emphasised this proof-of-value work in place of assessment for better teaching and learning. In situating our project against this backdrop, we wanted to re-emphasise the importance of assessment as and for learning. We wanted to engage in a continually reflective process that included the needs and thoughts of those participating in assessments (librarians and students). We wanted to deeply consider for whom (and why) we do assessment because "What is measured has value, or becomes valued as it is measured" (Wall et al., 2014, p. 9). So, what is it that we value?

1.3 Institutional & Departmental Context

As important as it is to review the context of assessment in libraries in the U.S., it is equally important to consider the institutional context in which we engaged in our assessment project. The University of Houston (UH) is a publicly funded university in Houston, Texas with an enrolment of 46,000 students. UH is designated by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education as a Research 1 (R1) Doctoral degree-granting Institution with Very High Research Activity (American Council on Education, 2025). This is comparable to research-intensive

universities in the United Kingdom. UH has a diverse student body (University of Houston Division of Research, 2025).

The Teaching and Learning department (T&L) within the UH Libraries was formed in 2021 and is responsible for IL instruction and research consultation support for undergraduate and graduate programmes not covered by our four subject libraries (Art, Architecture, and Design; Music; Health Sciences; and Medicine). Our department of eight librarians works with students and faculty and teach in both curricular and co-curricular environments.

The learning and growth of librarians and students are integral parts of our work. Teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes for students are measured through the lens of our collaboratively developed departmental mission, vision, and values. These values include:

- Inclusivity and accessibility when working with each other and students
- Understanding that the prior knowledge and life experiences of ourselves and our learners are valuable in the classroom and an important part of learning
- Collaboration with each other, within the library, and with our students and faculty
- Authentic, formative assessment that reflects the growth of ourselves and students
- A critical approach to IL, including how information is deemed valuable and who might be left out of those conversations
- Reflective learning and reflective teaching
- Experimentation,
- Empathy for ourselves and those we work with

Our reflective learning and reflective teaching value shapes much of the work of the department. For example, members of our department lead monthly learning sessions to engage in professional development. We share opportunities for scholarship and bring knowledge back to our colleagues from workshops and conferences. We honour a variety of perspectives when we co-plan and co-teach class sessions. We also debrief with one another to review what we can change or improve about the classes we co-teach or the classes for which we teach different sections. Our departmental goals often include reflective components that help us learn from a project we have pursued, not just complete it.

2. Reflection Toolkit

Because of our focus on development and reflection, we wanted to assess our instructional work based on our values. In 2023, after doing preliminary research on assessment, we found three key areas that we wanted to support, encourage, and assess: critical reflection, self-efficacy and professional growth, and authentic student learning assessment. We continued to investigate professional literature to develop the direction of our toolkit, finding particular value in the work of Stephen Brookfield (2017) on critically reflective teaching, Brookfield and Preskill's (2005) work on discussion facilitation, and Lemmons and Kirker's (2023) research on librarian self-efficacy.

We ultimately created the online Reflection Toolkit, which uses a critical reflective approach to assess the concepts of teacher-librarian self-efficacy and professional growth, and student learning in academic libraries. We felt it was key to honour the ideals of critical assessment, which meant that the process we designed needed to value the time and labour of teaching librarians. We wanted it to feel like a natural part of the teaching and learning process and not

like more work on our already busy schedules. Our departmental and UH Libraries colleagues are its initial intended audience, however, the toolkit is currently publicly available, hosted on an archival version of PubPub, soon to be transferred to a library-hosted website (Lopez et al. 2023). The Reflection Toolkit consists of four sections, described below.

2.1 Reflection Toolkit: Introduction

The introduction describes critical reflective practice as our approach to surfacing and questioning the assumptions we make about ourselves as teachers and as librarians, about our students, and about our approaches to teaching. Uncovering and reflecting upon our assumptions allows us to gain the perspective necessary for identifying unintentional actions in the classroom. We also learn more about what and how our students learn.

The introduction suggests Brookfield's four reflective lenses as a starting point for learning about our work by considering the perspectives of research and scholarship, our students, our colleagues, and ourselves (Brookfield, 2017).

2.2 Reflection Toolkit: Reflective Teaching

This section offers ideas and activities for growing and developing a reflective teaching practice. It reminds us that we can reflect on our own experiences of teaching, what we might learn from students, what we can glean from readings and conference presentations, and encourages us to act for the future.

This section focuses largely on self-efficacy, a concept developed by psychologist Albert Bandura (1977) to describe the beliefs people have about their ability to succeed when carrying out tasks. In Bandura's model, our self-efficacy beliefs come from our performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal reinforcement, and how we feel in body and in mind. Lemmons and Kirker (2023) adapted these concepts to develop a self-efficacy scale for teaching librarians. The toolkit presents this scale as a way to identify teaching experiences and topics to reflect upon. Librarians can use the scale to identify areas for growth, including areas where our beliefs about our teaching differ from observations made by our peers.

The reflective teaching section also includes prompts from Brookfield (2017) for critical conversations about teaching, which provide a valuable guide for learning about our teaching in community with our peers.

2.3 Reflection Toolkit: Student Learning

The student learning section describes formative assessment and ways to increase student readiness for completing research projects and assignments. We include mechanisms for capturing the meaningful ways we support students, allowing us to speak about our successes to others and to look back upon and appreciate work we can be proud of.

The student learning section offers opportunities to engage students in reflective practice. Student reflections at the beginning of class help us to understand where students are coming from and to guide the trajectory of the session. Quick polling activities throughout instruction can help gauge student engagement and understanding. End of session prompts ask students to reflect on their learning and can be gathered as part of large group discussions, written

activities, or as part of assignments. The information we gather from these activities can help us better understand student learning and improve our teaching strategies.

2.4 Reflection Toolkit: Process for Evaluation

We describe a two-year approach for evaluating our teaching programme in the process for evaluation section. While we will still maintain teaching statistics to determine trends for planning and administrative purposes, we use a qualitative, reflective framework that focuses on student learning, librarian self-efficacy, and reflective teaching to tell the true story of our teaching. This pilot implementation of this process is detailed in section 3 below.

3. Year One: Reflective Teaching

In 2024, T&L set a goal to implement the Reflection Toolkit over a two-year period. The first year focused on reflective teaching to boost teacher-librarian self-efficacy and professional growth. Each member of the department chose a focus area for structured reflection. These focus areas included facilitating classroom discussion, improving approaches to research consultations with students, and providing feedback on instructional materials. T&L wanted to model this process for teaching colleagues in the library, so we invited members of other departments to our toolkit kick-off meeting. Librarians shared their self-efficacy focus areas and intended methods of reflection for the year.

Throughout the year, librarians learned about and tried new reflective strategies for developing self-efficacy in their areas of interest. Librarians shared insights, brainstormed approaches, and maintained motivation through regular check-ins and learning sessions. One of the authors worked on developing self-efficacy in facilitating classroom discussion. While reading *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005), she learned that the unrealistic expectations she had for the classroom were causing all her discussion activities to fall short of ideal. Armed with new ideas for discussion activities and methods for facilitating them, she now focuses on successfully maintaining a positive new shift in thinking about what signals productive classroom discussion. Another author focused on her approach to student research consultations. She worked on being more present with students by exploring resources together during consultations, rather than preparing as much as possible on the student's research topic before consultations. With the new approach, this author found increased confidence in her reference skills, creativity, and problem-solving. A third author reflected on providing feedback to teacher-librarian colleagues, especially members of other departments. Each time she was asked to review a lesson plan, video script, or instruction module, she took time to write down her feelings about her reluctance to be critical and find ways to improve various instruction materials. This allowed for deeper reflection on herself as a teacher and leader in the department, the weight of her feedback in a variety of contexts, and seeing herself as someone with enough knowledge to improve teaching materials.

Throughout the year, we had several opportunities to discuss the toolkit implementation. A May learning session focused on facilitating classroom discussion and served as a check-in with everyone about their self-efficacy goals. We discussed how people were feeling about the reflection toolkit, which reflective activities people were interested in trying, and what we could do to help improve the process. In August, two of the authors led a learning session on *Small Teaching* and tied it to small reflecting, emphasising the power of day-to-day small changes (Lang, 2021). Regular assessment check-ins and reminders occurred as part of weekly

department meetings and one-on-one meetings with supervisors. The authors engaged in additional debriefs after learning sessions and department meetings to review what was going well, what could be improved, and what we should facilitate for the future.

Feedback from our colleagues throughout the year indicated that talking about the toolkit and reflection goals periodically made them more mindful throughout their teaching or consultations, even if they sometimes forgot to engage in their chosen reflective method. Some librarians noticed an increase in more intentional debriefing sessions after co-teaching. We also noted worry on the part of librarians that reflective practices weren't being done correctly, or that more had to be done with the reflections gathered. We regularly reminded everyone that there was not a specific, correct way to participate. If a reminder led to more reflection, that was more than enough.

In November 2024, we wrapped up our reflective teaching year with a celebration of teaching where we discussed our self-efficacy reflective processes. Librarians shared photos, reflective writings, and assorted ephemera from the year's work in a supportive and low-pressure environment. One of the authors shared sticky notes from a new discussion activity she tried during a local conference presentation. Another author shared a poem she wrote that conveyed her feelings about providing instructional feedback to peers. Other librarians shared memes related to personal growth, combatting perfectionism, and coping with uncertainty.

Because we wanted the evaluation of this reflective process to follow the same spirit of critical assessment that informed the reflection toolkit in general, we structured the evaluation process to emphasise development, rather than to prove our value. We collectively discussed our individual answers to a set of questions, including:

- What did you learn about student learning, your teaching practice, or your teaching self-efficacy?
- How did the reflection and/or evaluation strategies you selected work for you? What worked or what didn't work?
- What have you changed in your teaching approach as a result of this process?

We closed our celebration with a look toward the future and next steps for our year of student learning assessment.

4. Year Two: Student Learning

Year Two focused on assessing student learning outcomes through reflective activities. We started 2025 with a learning session to re-introduce the Reflection Toolkit and facilitated a discussion on student learning strategies. We asked department members which classes they would be interested in revising to include reflective assessment as well as whether and how they might like to work together to implement reflective strategies in class. Towards the end of the semester, we checked in with department members about which classes they used reflective strategies in and how well those strategies worked.

For improving keyword use and development, one author asked students what they learned. When she teaches the class again in the fall, she plans to ask a reflective question that focuses more on keyword development to better assess her learning outcome on keyword generation. One author and a colleague support a business class that creates marketing plans for Target, a

U.S. retailer that carries a variety of goods. To support their outcome that students learn how to effectively communicate their research, they had students read an essay that exemplifies effective ways to incorporate research sources and then engage in reflective discussion about how to apply those strategies to their presentation talking points and slides.

Two authors worked on two sessions with a theatre class: one day primarily focused on instruction and a second day for searching and assistance. A reflective goal-setting activity at the beginning of the second day aligned well with the teaching faculty's intentions for the session. Time ran out for an end-of-session reflection meant to help students brainstorm their next steps because the students were so actively engaged in finding resources. This class may be better suited for reflective activities throughout the course of a session in future iterations.

The professor of a history capstone course wanted his students to better develop their research topics during their IL session. One author developed a worksheet with reflective prompts and paired it with discussion activities. The session centred completely on students talking through their topic ideas, giving one another feedback, and brainstorming the information they would need and where to find it. At the end of the session, students indicated that they had much more confidence with the direction and scope of their topics and how to move forward. After the session, this author heard from the course instructor — twice! — about how effective the activities were in helping students plan their projects.

During a summer 2025 learning session focused on assessing student learning outcomes, department members brainstormed reflective activities they could use to assess the learning outcomes of classes they frequently teach. At our year-end celebration of teaching, we will consider what we learned, what we thought went well or not so well, and how focusing attention on student learning reflection has changed how we teach.

5. Conclusion

This project originated from a collective desire to better understand and improve our teaching and student learning. To that end, we developed a new approach to assessment within our department and documented it in our *Reflection Toolkit*. As the second year of implementation concludes, we are evaluating the two-year reflective assessment process itself through gathering participant feedback. We intend to consider how and at what frequency we will repeat the assessment program in this structured way.

We want to acknowledge that our prioritisation of qualitative, reflective assessment may engender criticism from those who find value in the quantitative metrics typically used to evaluate library instruction. We note that it was never a goal of this project to replace existing data collection or to challenge its importance. Rather, we found that existing evaluation methods failed to capture the extent of our work and did not provide constructive information that would help us evaluate and improve our teaching.

For readers who may want to embark on a similar project at their own institution, we recommend using a backward design approach, similar to how one might create a class lesson plan based on a set of learning objectives. Begin by noting the values of your team, both current and aspirational. Consider what questions you would want to answer in assessing your instruction and then determine the kinds of assessment practices that would help you answer

those questions. Plan reflectively by considering whether the chosen assessment practices are in line with your values and if there is a chance they may be a source of unintentional harm to either students or teaching librarians.

Declarations

Ethics approval

Ethical review was not considered necessary in alignment with the University of Houston's guidance on the conduct of ethical research.

Funding

Not applicable.

AI-generated content

No AI tools were used.

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