
Active Learning with Assessment

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Introduction and Context

Motivated by heightened demands for accountability, academic libraries are increasingly striving to incorporate assessment into their planning and decision-making processes. Employing a systematic approach to evaluating the libraries' services, processes, and practices is relatively new to Concordia University Library.

An Assessment Committee with representatives from public services, collection services, library systems, and administration was formed in June 2015. One of the initial objectives of the committee was to raise awareness of assessment within the library. It was also recognized that the knowledge and skills of both librarians and support staff relating to assessment had yet to be developed. As members of the Assessment Committee, we felt that providing learning opportunities relating to assessment for all staff would support integration of assessment into everyday practice.

At the same time, the university and the library were engaged in a comprehensive strategic directions exercise. After a series of brainstorming sessions involving all library staff in the spring of 2015, a five-year strategic plan for the library was drafted. The first objective of the plan is to "Empower library staff to develop skills and knowledge and to share expertise."¹

With both the objectives of the Assessment Committee and the strategic plan in mind, we developed a voluntary two-part "Introduction to Assessment" workshop open to all staff, which was delivered in the fall of 2015. The goals of this workshop were twofold: to increase awareness and understanding of assessment practices, applications and outcomes in the library, and to increase staff engagement and interest in library assessment.

Active Learning Framework

Inspired by two case studies² examining assessment of circulation policies and fines, we decided to

employ an active learning framework through a participatory exercise with a real-world example.

Active learning is a pedagogical approach based on the principle that by actively participating in a learning process, participants learn and retain more than if they are a passive audience for the delivery of information. In *Active Learning Techniques for Librarians*, Walsh and Inala suggest that, "by being involved in the learning through doing, discussing, questioning and applying, there is more emphasis on learners working it out for themselves and developing a better understanding than if they were just given the information."³ Another element of active learning is that participants employ their own prior knowledge and experiences to participate in the learning activities. Individual learners' expertise and perspective is thus shared within the actual learning process.

Introduction to Assessment Workshop Design

The workshop consisted of two 90-minute sessions. During the first session, there was a brief and general overview of assessment, and various examples of current and past assessment activities from the library that participants would be aware of, but not necessarily think of as assessment. This was followed by the introduction of a case scenario on loan policies:

A request was made through the suggestion blog to extend due dates on books. You have been asked to gather and analyze data that can be used in the decision-making process and to submit recommendations as to whether the library should modify its circulation policy.

The case scenario surrounding circulation was carefully chosen so that it did not focus on staff productivity or workflows. It was very important that no staff members attending from any sector of the library felt that their particular roles or duties were being scrutinized or held up for general

discussion by the library as a whole. Framing the activity as a student request for longer loan periods was a scenario easily recognized and understood by all staff, as well as an example that was not tied specifically to job performance.

After the presentation of the scenario, participants were divided into groups and asked to discuss what information and data would be useful for

them to have in hand to address the scenario recommendation. They were also asked to provide a rationale as to why they were requesting this information and what they thought the data would tell them. Additionally, they were also asked to rank this information as either (a) crucial to the decision; (b) useful but could be substituted with other data; or (c) nice to have but not necessary. This was all recorded in a worksheet that they were required to hand in at the end of the first session (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Information request form from Session 1 handout

INFORMATION REQUESTED:	
<p>IS THIS DATA . . .</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Crucial to your decision</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Useful, but could be substituted with other data</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Nice to have, but not necessary</p>	<p>Why are you requesting this data? What will it tell you?</p>

During the second session, participants were provided with some of the data they requested. The sessions were scheduled so as to give us time to gather as much of the requested data as possible between the first and second sessions. Given the 90-minute time constraints of the sessions, it was necessary to do some of the data analysis for the participants and present graphs, tables, and figures, as opposed to raw data. Along with the graphs, tables, and figures, we also outlined some of the data's limitations (i.e., what it told us and what it did not tell us, and what assumptions could not be made based on the data). The participants were then given a copy of the data, divided into groups, and given time to further analyze and discuss before

being asked to deliver a recommendation on the case scenario. In addition to providing a recommendation on extending the loan periods, they were asked:

- Which data was the most important when making your recommendation? Why?
- How would you assess the impact of your recommendation?

Scenario Recommendations

In total, there were seven groups that participated in providing a recommendation on the scenario. All seven recommendations were different. This in itself was educational, as it demonstrated how personal experiences and biases influence how we look at the data: even after being informed of the limitations

of the data, there were still groups who made assumptions not warranted by the data or who chose to focus on one specific dataset and disregarded others. Many groups considered different data points to be of varying levels of importance. However, during the discussions in the second session, it became apparent that there was one piece of data, frequency distribution of loan length by patron type, which would have enabled them to make a decision, but it was data that we were unable to provide for the workshop. Many groups acknowledged this missing data as a factor that kept their recommendation from being complete, or that they were not confident in their recommendation.

There were two distinct themes to the recommendations: length of loan period and renewals, and issues surrounding recalls. In terms of recommendations around the length of the initial loan period, four groups were largely in favour of the status quo with slight policy adjustments, while three groups were in favour of extending the loan period.

While the recommendations provided by the workshop participants were secondary to the main goals of the workshop, in keeping with the proposed scenario, we submitted a final report on the case scenario to the Library Administration Team. Therefore, after the workshops, we needed to synthesize the data and these various recommendations. Initially we had hoped to provide a summary report with one recommendation. However, given the vastly different recommendations, we opted to outline the implication and limitation of the data all the groups consulted, and presented the commonalities in the recommendations as well as the differences. We circulated the report for feedback amongst workshop participants before submitting it to the Library Administration Team.

Findings

The two primary goals of the workshop were to increase awareness and understanding of assessment, and to further staff engagement with library assessment. To that end, we created pre- and post-workshop questionnaires that participants were asked to complete. The purpose of these questionnaires was to gauge participants' baseline knowledge (and subsequent learning) of and attitudes towards assessment.

The pre-workshop questionnaire showed that the participants felt they had a fairly good understanding of assessment; impressions of their own understanding improved after the sessions (see Figure 2). We also asked what tools and data sources can be used in assessment, and instructed participants to select as many options as they felt applied (see Figure 3). All of the options provided were mentioned during the first workshop as tools involved in assessment. There was a slight increase in the proportion of responses for each option in the post-workshop questionnaire. The "other" option allowed participants to write in responses. Before the sessions, the only "other" responses suggested using "Staff feedback" and "Benchmarking." After the second session, the "other" responses suggested "Knowledge of software and systems" and "Common sense."

Most telling was the change in the participants' understanding: there was a question that asked them which of their current tasks contribute to library assessment. On the pre-workshop questionnaire, there were three responses of "none." On the post-workshop questionnaire, the examples provided by participants of their tasks were more specific, and no one replied with "nothing" or "none."

Figure 2. Pre- and post-workshop self-described understanding of assessment

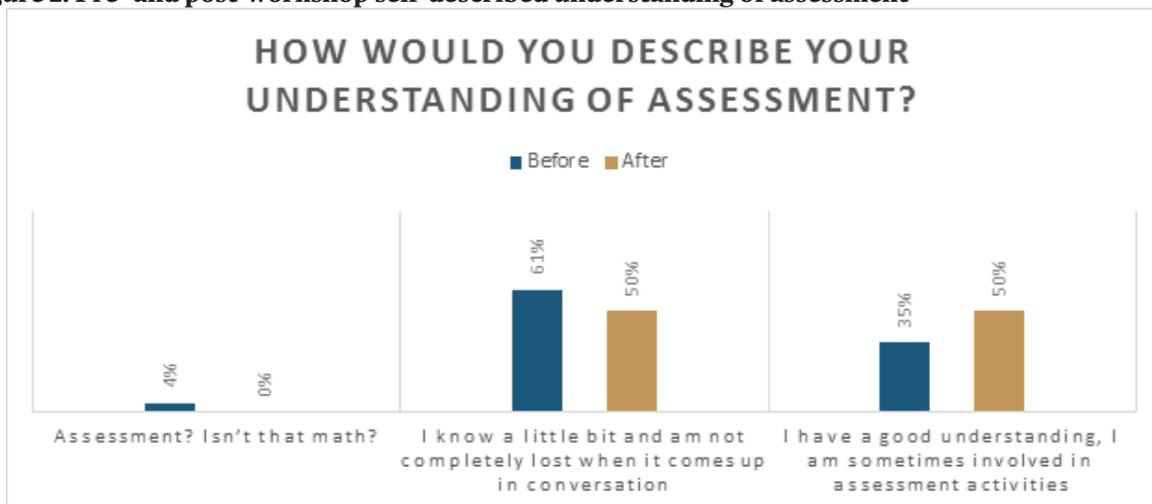
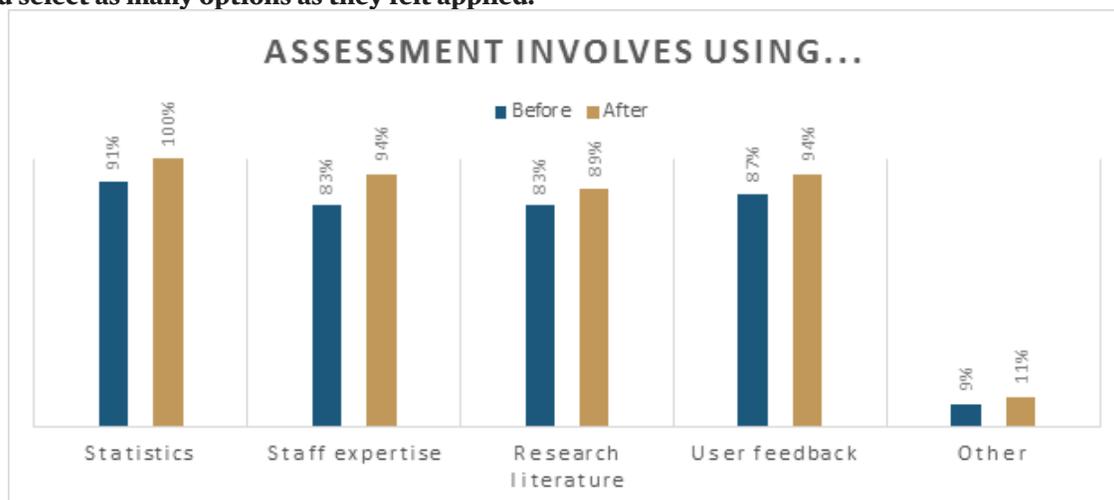


Figure 3. Pre- and post-workshop understanding of assessment tools and data sources. Participants could select as many options as they felt applied.

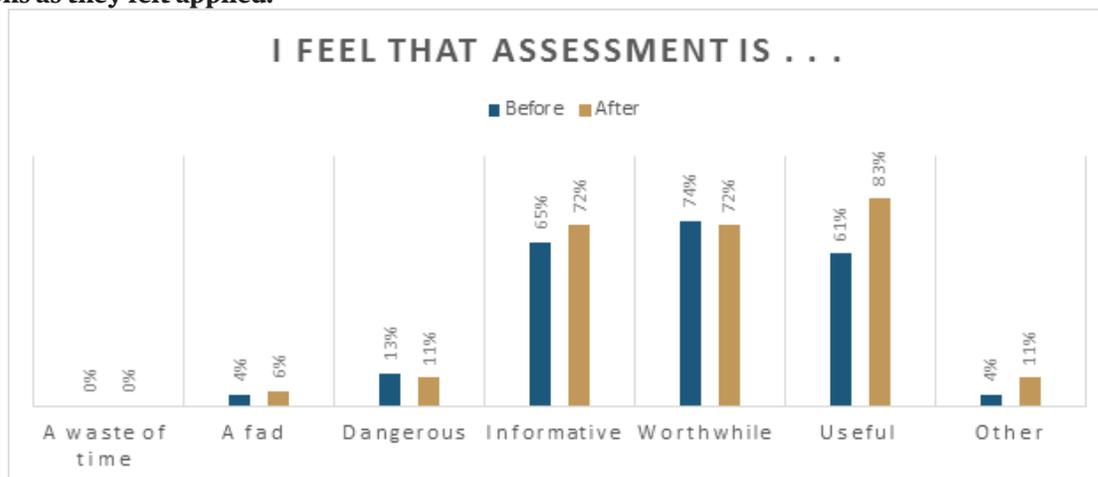


To track any changes in attitude, we asked participants to complete the phrase, “I feel assessment is..” allowing them to pick as many words as they found appropriate from a provided list. There were an equal number of negative and positive descriptions.

As shown in Figure 4, no one felt at either time that assessment was a waste of time. The “negative” sentiment choices did not significantly shift after the second session; however, there was an increase

in the proportion of participants who felt that assessment was informative and useful after the workshop. There was also an “other” option, which allowed participants to write in responses. Before the sessions, the only “other” response was that assessment is “important for achieving goals.” After the second session, there were two “other” responses. One felt that assessment is “necessary” and the other provided a caution—that it “may be difficult to maintain objectivity when using assessment tools.”

Figure 4. Pre- and post-workshop attitudes towards assessment. Participants could select as many options as they felt applied.



One question, appearing only on the final questionnaire, asked respondents if they would be interested in learning more about assessment. Eleven respondents said yes, six were undecided, and one said no. Presumably, the majority of participants attended the workshops due to an interest in assessment; nevertheless, while the sessions may have satisfied some participants, 61% still remained interested in learning more about the topic, which is a positive indication towards increased engagement with assessment.

The final question on the post-session questionnaire asked if participants had any comments about the session itself or ideas for future sessions. The responses received here indicated that participants enjoyed the active learning component of the sessions as well as the opportunity to collaborate and brainstorm with staff and librarians from other departments:

Loved the participation aspect.

...having the scenario and the breakout groups, especially the chance to work with people from different departments, was a really great way of approaching the issue and giving context to assessment.

I enjoyed the active portions of the sessions, to encourage us to think about and work through the process.

It was a useful exercise and it was great to have librarians and staff mixed up at tables to get various opinions and expertise.

Practical Implications

Given that the first annual objective for 2016/2017 stemming from Concordia Library's new strategic plan is to "Develop a training plan for support and technical staff,"⁴ an immediate implication for our institution is that the active learning workshop structure can provide a template and model for other training initiatives to follow.

In a more general sense, these workshops are an example of assessment outreach to current library staff. This is a manageable and effective way to increase the discussion around assessment at an institution. By opening up the workshops to all library staff, it brought together people from every sector of the library, allowing them to share perspectives.

Conclusion

The sessions helped demystify assessment, as all participants were able to see the complexities of assessment and interpreting data. Establishing a positive staff attitude towards assessment cannot be achieved in a one-time workshop; this was simply a starting point. Feedback from the workshop indicated that participants very much enjoyed the participatory and cross-departmental nature of the sessions, and when asked if they were interested in learning more about assessment, the majority responded positively. Additionally, discussion

from the workshops has spread through word of mouth, and several people who did not attend have expressed interest in future sessions.

Although there was initial resistance to the concept of assessment, there is demonstrated interest by staff in participating in these processes, as well as seeing and acting on the results. Beyond the initial goals of the workshops, the sessions functioned as a learning experience for the committee, and are helping shape our perspective of the committee's role as facilitators in decision-making processes.

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to our assessment assistant Stefan Bunea for his invaluable aid with gathering the workshop data and Dubravka Kapa, chair of the Assessment Committee, for acting as a sounding board and helping us set the direction of the workshops.

Notes

1. For more information, see Inspiring Success: Concordia University Library Strategic Plan

2016/21, <http://library.concordia.ca/about/plan/strategic-plan.pdf>.

2. Kathleen Reed, Jean Blackburn, and Daniel Sifton, "Putting a Sacred Cow Out to Pasture: Assessing the Removal of Fines and Reduction of Barriers at a Small Academic Library," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 40 (2010): 275–280, doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2014.04.003; Duane Wilson, "Why Can't They Keep the Book Longer and Do We Really Need to Charge Fines? Assessing Circulation Policies at the Harold B. Lee Library: A Case Study," *Journal of Access Services* 11 (2014): 135–149, doi:10.1080/15367967.2014.914815.
3. Andrew Walsh and Padma Inala, *Active Learning Techniques for Librarians: Practical Examples* (Oxford, UK: Chandos, 2010), 5.
4. For more information, see Inspiring Success: Concordia University Library Strategic Plan 2016/21, <http://library.concordia.ca/about/plan/strategic-plan.pdf>.