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Information Literacy Assessment: Putting the Cart before the Horse

by Nancy Everhart, Ph.D.

I am delighted to be invited to write for S.O.S.'s *Educators' Spotlight Digest*. Some may believe my topic of information literacy assessment is putting the cart before the horse since assessment is traditionally thought of as something we do at the end of our teaching. But curriculum design gurus Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, authors of *Understanding by Design*, actually coined the term "backwards design." They recommend educators to begin with the question: What would we accept as evidence that students have attained the desired understandings and proficiencies—*before* proceeding to plan teaching and learning experiences? This focus on the end result also assists in forming concise, measurable, objectives that are inextricably linked to assessment. Once the objectives and assessments are in place, instruction and student activities can develop rather straightforwardly.

This all sounds very logical. However, I find assessment, and its direct connection to objectives, to be one of the most difficult concepts to convey to aspiring school library media specialists – some of whom are even current classroom teachers. One of the major assignments in my course, *The Instructional Role of the Information Professional*, is for students to develop a collaborative information literacy lesson plan that quite naturally includes how their students will be evaluated as to whether or not they achieved the objectives of the lesson. Often my students state that observation is how they will evaluate their students but fail to provide criteria for the behaviors they are hoping to observe. A recent example is that for the objective of: "80% of students will successfully narrow a search" the assessment proposed was that the media specialist would walk around to determine if there was any confusion and respond to student questions as they were searching. I asked the student: How do you determine success? How do you determine confusion? What does a successfully narrowed search look like? What about the other 20% of the students? Do you forget about them? The assessment and the objective(s) should be written to address what the individual student is expected to achieve. In this instance it would be more appropriate to state the objective as: "The student will successfully narrow 4 out of 5 searches." Even this objective can be improved by including the conditions (time, resources) under which their performance will be judged.

Rubrics

I suggested that the student design a rubric to guide the assessment. Rubrics, scoring tools often used when assessing students, are particularly helpful when observing. Simple rubrics are checklists. More complex rubrics include some form of scale to rate student characteristics or performance and contain specific standards arranged in levels indicating the degree to which a standard has been met. The advantages of using rubrics in assessment are that they enable assessment to be more objective and consistent, they demystify the expectations for the students for a project and thus reduce (and hopefully eliminate) the "guesswork factor," and they force the teacher to clarify his/her criteria in specific terms. Rubrics may also be

used to encourage students to develop a consciousness about the criteria they use to assess their own and their peers abilities and performance. A sample rubric for assessing narrowing a search might look like this:

	4 Excellent	3 Good	2 Needs Improvement	1 Unacceptable
Technique	Uses a variety of methods such as Boolean operators, quotation marks, and dates to narrow searches	Uses two or less methods to narrow searches	Uses only one method to narrow searches	Cannot narrow searches
Result	Narrows four searches	Narrows three searches	Narrows one or two searches	Narrows zero searches
Time	Completes task in less than 20 minutes	Completes task between 20 and 30 minutes	Completes task between 30 and 40 minutes	Does not complete task
Independence	Works independently	Asks one question for clarification	Asks two questions for clarification	Needs constant supervision

The teacher, school library media specialist, peer, or the student him/herself might apply this rubric. A wide variety of sample rubrics can be found on *Kathy Schrock's Guide for Educators: Assessment Rubrics* website. Designing a rubric will also help to focus the attention of the evaluator on the important outcomes of an assignment. Can students recite the Dewey Decimal System by 100's or is it more important to be able to use the OPAC to find a book of interest on the shelf? What is more essential to the PowerPoint presentation - the clip art and font style or the synthesis of the resources used to support a new idea? In addition to rubrics, a wide range of assessment methods can be used to collect evidence of students' information literacy as described in my book, *Evaluating the School Library Media Center*.

Logs

Assign single or double entry logs to be handed in with a first draft of a project. This is a good way to keep track of the research process. Students could be asked to keep a running commentary on a specific aspect of the process, such as use of beyond-library-walls sources. Logs can be checked at each or any stage of the research process. Students can use logs for self-assessment or peer assessment.

Student Initiative

Have students select their individual needs or sequence or time frames of skill goals within the educational objectives. Assess these and move on as students achieve goals. This includes written plans by students regarding individual and/or group

responsibilities, student pre-selection of audience for a completed activity or student preparation of assessment forms to guide student or teachers at a preview or performance. It also includes structured selection of focus, format, and style.

Self-Evaluation by Individual Students or Groups

Self-evaluation has traditionally been utilized at the conclusion of an activity, project, or unit. Additionally, mid-point student reflection on the research process can be especially valuable. Include such analyses within a log, in a sequential how-to guide by a student about her project, a rubric, via individual or small-group conferencing (with or without supervision), or with a survey.

Portfolios

Put an information skills assessment checklist inside a student's writing portfolio or research portfolio for tracking purposes. Ask students to justify or to describe criteria used for self-selection from a year-long portfolio for permanent inclusion. Include information literacy as an option for the final graduation project.

Modeling

Set standards for quality by modeling and by using examples of past student work. Even when provided with a rubric, not all students will understand what is meant by the criteria or how to apply them. Jay McTighe suggests it is a good technique to present mediocre and excellent work and ask students to analyze the differences and identify the characteristics that distinguish the excellent examples from the rest. In this way, students learn the criteria through tangible models and concrete examples.

Authentic Assessment

Although there is currently a national focus on standardized state tests due to No Child Left Behind, there is also increased interest and awareness of the value of authentic assessment. Nowhere is this more evident for our field than with the new standardized test by Educational Testing Service (ETS) – the Information and Communication Literacy Assessment. The test is a 75-minute, online scenario-based, assessment that presents real-time, scenario-based tasks. Test takers are asked to perform information management tasks such as extracting information from a database, developing a spreadsheet, or composing an e-mail based on research findings. The Core Academic Assessment is targeted to students transitioning to college and it is beginning to be used by high schools for seniors. Preparing students to take the optional ICT is an opportunity for school library media specialists to demonstrate their value in information literacy instruction and assessment. These assessments may provide the perfect starting point for “backwards design.”

For More Information:

-Educational Testing Service, ICT Literacy Assessment, (2006). Available at the [ICT Literacy Assessment Web site](#).

-Nancy Everhart, *Evaluating the School Library Media Center: Analysis Techniques and Research Practices*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited (1998).

-Kathy Schrock, *Kathy Schrock's Guide for Educators: Assessment Rubrics*, (2006). Available: <http://school.discovery.com/schrockguide/assess.html>

-Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*. New York: Prentice-Hall (2000).

About the Author

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