LIBRARIANS AS LITERACY SPONSORS:
a critique of information literacy assessment tools

by Kerry Sutherland

Deborah Brandt claims that literacy sponsors "are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress or withhold literacy – and gain advantage by it in some way" (19). Literacy, in this regard, is the ability to communicate successfully in writing to an intended audience. One might expect a definition of literacy to include reading ability, but because reading is not a productive skill, it does not afford the same attention as writing, which offers "the only viable way to have voice" (48). Sponsors of literacy, who aim to advance the production of successful written communication, control access to the benefits of these particular skills, primarily the benefit of having one's concerns and ideas taken into consideration by an intended audience for a specific purpose, whether it be to inform, describe, persuade, impress, or entertain.

Brant, emphasizing the productive aspect of literacy, notes the economic, political, intellectual, and spiritual benefits for those who develop literacy as a written ability (5). The ability to communicate through writing has a profound effect on one's sense of security and dignity (1), and is "a key resource in gaining profit and edge" (21). Literacy sponsorship has to do with the "association between literacy skill and social viability" (19). Clearly, teachers, and composition teachers in particular, are literacy sponsors who promote these skills as much as possible under the circumstances of their work environment, and gain advantage by fulfilling the terms of their positions and producing students who can make their voices heard through the written word, ideally earning job and financial security, along with "credit by association" (19) by successful sponsorship.

Librarians, on the other hand, are generally associated with reading as opposed to writing. Teaching students how to find reading material suited to their information needs has always been the primary role of academic and school librarians. Those needs revolve around a lack of information; therefore, the skills involved in the ability to access information fall under the umbrella of information literacy, according to the American Library Association. "Ensuring that students are information literate . . . has long been a key priority for the profession of librarianship," explains Neely

(2). Reading is well-promoted in a variety of highly publicized campaigns through various venues, but "writing enjoys no such sponsorship. Writing is less explicitly taught and publicly valued than reading [is]" (Brandt 167). How is literacy in terms of written communication, and the sponsorship of that literacy, connected to information literacy, and what role do librarians play as literacy sponsors by the behaviors of teaching and assessing information literacy?

The five standards for information literacy set forth by the Association of College and Research Libraries, which break down into twenty-two performance indicators, are meant to offer a guide for teachers and librarians to use in the pursuit of effective critical thinking acquisition instruction. The outcomes are meant to aid the assessment of the skills to which information literacy standards aim. While the ACRL information literacy standards document published by the American Library Association does not indicate priority or preference for any one standard over the others, ACRL information literacy competency Standard Four is generally neglected by information literacy assessment practices and is also the standard most closely tied with written communication and writing performance. It states that "the information literate student, individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose . . . [outcome 3.d] communicates clearly and with a style that supports the purposes of the intended audience" (ACRL 13).

While the primary concern of this essay is that of practices in post-secondary education, the transferability of information literacy skills from high school to college is worth note. The American Association of School Librarians standards for information literacy, which focus, according to the AASL, on the learning process, include the ability to "use writing and speaking skills to communicate new understandings effectively" (3.1.3; AASL 15). This focus on written expression is clearly of the same mind as the above mentioned ACRL standard, with the ACRL standard at a higher level of expectation of student ability. While Gavin claims that "students must leave the pedagogical comfort zone of high school where they learned bits of knowledge fed to them incrementally by their teachers" (1), according to the ASSL, these students should leave the K-12 experience with information literacy skills already in development, established at the primary school level and built upon through high school.

Assessment — a critique

The assessment of information literacy, which is generally undertaken by librarians as opposed to subject instructors, is primarily limited to questionnaires or multiple choice examinations on the suitability of specific resources to research needs, and if and when the written product of the research is involved in information literacy assessment at all, as Knight notes, the quality of the writing is not observed, but rather, only the content in a manner of discovering whether or not research was pertinent is of interest.

Kent State University's Project SAILS, or Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills, is a high-profile example of information literacy assessment outside of the context of written product performance. This 45 question multiple choice test for undergraduate students, developed by award-winning librarians at the Kent State University's School of Library and Information Science (the developers won the 2009 Ilene F. Rockman Publication Award for their book on information literacy assessment), is "a response to a growing need to measure information literacy of college students with a valid and reliable instrument." The team "envisioned a standardized tool that is valid and reliable," and claims validity and reliability of the SAILS instrument based on the "good measure" of information literacy, compared to SAT/ACT scores and another information literacy examination, the Information Literacy Test (ILT) from James Madison University.

The SAILS developers' award-winning publication, *A Practical Guide to Information Literacy for Academic Librarians*, defines validity as referring to "how well the measurement tool, in this case, the knowledge test, measures the phenomenon of interest" (92). This definition, outdated by at least twenty years, is, according to Huot, "impoverished" because it "allows for claims of validity regardless of the theoretical orientation of the assessment or its consequences" (Re *Articulating* 37). SAILS developers consider their instrument valid, but validity, by the currently accepted definition of the word, cannot be based on the instrument itself, nor can it be finite or complete. Twenty years ago, Messick explained that "validity . . . is not an all-or-none question" but rather an attribute described by degrees (10), and Cronbach notes that "validation is never finished" (5). Sireci agrees that "validity can be evaluated only with respect to a specific testing purpose" (478), which, of course, is not for test developers to decide, since they do not make the value judgments and decisions that test administrators and users of test results do. Validity is about this aspect of testing, rather than the test itself or what it purports to measure.

The latest edition of *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (1999) explains validity on the first page of the first section of the publication, thus enforcing the importance of clarity and understanding of the word in use for assessment purposes: "Validity refers to the degree to which evidence and theory support the interpretations of test scores entailed by proposed uses of tests. Validity is, therefore, the most fundamental consideration in developing and evaluating tests" (9). This 'fundamental consideration' is incorrectly defined and justified by the SAILS team, which includes a professor with a background in educational measurement, and claims validity for the test itself based on the test's ability to measure what it claims to measure. Huot claims that "such a limited definition is not only inadequate, but dangerous because it accords an unexamined authority to an assessment that has the power to define educational achievement and influence instruction" (Re *Articulating* 48). Messick insists that "validity is an inductive summary of both the existing evidence for and the actual as well as potential consequences of score interpretation and uses." (5)

A shift from the former understanding of validity, as used by the SAILS team, to the current one, occurred between 1955 and 1989, beginning with Cronbach in 1955, who recognized the need to consider the proposed interpretation of test results before evaluating validity. The currently accepted definition of validity encourages critical reflection on the use of the results of the test, which are, of course, the materials with which those in power control those who take the test by using the results to affect the lives of test takers.

Project SAILS, which is based on the ALA Information Literacy Content Standards for Higher Education, tests skill sets involving the development and execution of research strategies (searching for, retrieving, evaluating, and documenting information) and the legal and ethical use of found information. The overview for the project includes the intention to treat the "ability to locate, access, and evaluate information" because those are the skills the developers believe "essential to closing the gap between the information rich and the information poor." The team acknowledges the omission of 25 objectives and outcomes that are not tested by the SAILS instrument, specifically because they "cannot be tested in the multiple-choice format." These represent skills within four of the standards represented by the test. The glaring absence of an entire standard (Four), however, is not admitted in any part of the SAILS document.

Project SAILS is not the only information literacy assessment instrument that fails to examine standards and outcomes dealing with written communication. Only three of the 23 instruments featured in *Assessing Student Learning Outcomes for Information Literacy Instruction in Academic Institutions* handle communication outcomes; and several of the instruments, while included in a book on information literacy assessment, are not actually tools for such assessment. Instead, they detail the evaluation of research or information skills, rather than information literacy. Information literacy, by definition, includes a communication aspect, and without the consideration of that aspect, those instruments explore skill sets that operate without the aspect of literacy and communication. To place all of these instruments together under the umbrella of 'information literacy' is inaccurate and misleading.

Another publication that represents research skills as information literacy is *Integrating Information Literacy Into the Higher Education Curriculum: Practical Methods for Transformation*, in which Lynn Cameron details the evolution of the Library Skills Test at James Madison University. Aptly titled, the LST, which was created and used in the 1980s, became the Informational Skills Seeking Test (ISST) by the late 1990s. Neither version looks at the communication of information, and in fact, are not titled as information literacy assessments, but are included in this book, which states that there is an "increasing validity" to the ISST (229), when validity, in actuality, is not about the test itself. Messick is very clear in determining that the test itself is not validated, but rather the use, inferences, and decisions made based on the interpretation of the score

is validated (5). Kane agrees that "validation focuses on interpretations, or meanings, and on decisions, which reflect values and consequences" (18). The comment on Standard 1.2 of the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* adds additional credence to this perspective:

> Statements about validity should refer to particular interpretations and uses. It is incorrect to use the unqualified phrase 'the validity of the test.' No test is valid for all purposes or in all situations. Each recommended use of interpretation requires validation and should specify in clear language the population for which the test is intended, the construct it is intended to measure, and the manner and contexts in which test scores are to be employed (17-18).

In another article in *Integrating Information Literacy Into the Higher Education Curriculum: Practical Methods for Transformation*, Lindauer and Brown outline the development of the Bay Area Community College Information Competency Assessment Project. The authors note that the project, which was designed from 2000-2003 by librarians working within five community colleges in California, is an incomplete assessment, because of the "practical limitations of what could reasonably be assessed in an exam setting" (171). Standard Four is not included in the exam, as it "would require some type of fairly lengthy writing and/or speaking assignment to assess" (171). Since Standard Four does not 'fit in' to the desired testing structure, it is ignored.

The aforementioned assessments, as they are called, are not really assessments at all, because assessments, according to Delandshire, are "concerned with determining the significance, importance, or value of an event and refers to the procedures used to obtain information and form value judgments" (16). If, according to Messick, the basic validity question is "*should* the test scores be interpreted and used in the manner proposed?" but there is no concern for "value judgments" or use of the results, these activities are merely measurements, or the "assignment of numbers to properties of objects or events" (16). "When assessments are adopted and promoted without appropriate validation inquiry . . . we are jeopardizing our students' opportunities for learning and success," claims O'Neill (62).

Mueller very specifically denies the necessity for a standard "for *using* the information once it has been located, assessed, and evaluated. Virtually everything we do involves using information, so, in my view, to include it in the definition of information literacy unnecessarily broadens it" (78). What is the purpose, then, of teaching and assessing research and evaluation skills if the end result, that is, the communication of the information processed and reformulated, is not considered? Mueller believes that the communicative aspect of the research process should lie in the hands of others who teach and assess writing and speaking: "I believe that to include such uses of information dilutes the meaning of information literacy, stretching it too far" (78). He advocates, essentially, divorcing the goal of

the process from the process itself, and while librarians, prompted by ALA standards and statements, claim to pursue partnership with other academic disciplines by collaborating on assignments in order to instill information literacy skills as part of a natural, problem-solving process, they fall short when it comes to the standard involving written communication.

Lane recognizes that in "standards-based education, the standards should be derived from the construct" (390) but this is not happening in information literacy education, which is, apparently, standards-based but removed from the context of actual use with the entirety of the purported standards, allowing for the evaluation of only those skills promoted by librarians. Why should we teach information literacy up to the communication standard, when it seems pointless to have skills of research and evaluation if one cannot successfully share newfound knowledge with others?

University graduates should, as a primary goal of those responsible for their education, be able to problem solve and successfully participate in knowledge extension with those in their field and the community in general. An information literate individual is action-oriented (Bruce 27), practiced in problem solving from his or her experience with writing processes which make use of information literacy skills as outlined in information literacy standards set forth by the AASL and ALA beginning at the grade school level and continuing through post-secondary education. Baker recognizes that composition teachers "provide space for students to develop a critical consciousness, both about their own lives and the academic world in which they will perform" (187) and the opportunity to express that consciousness through the written word. The assessment of information literacy skills and the use of said skills as a whole rather than as parts separated from the critical thinking process they are meant to develop is essential to determine a student's ability to communicate successfully through writing.

Project SAILS authors suggest collaboration with teachers by offering to "evaluate the citation list for a research paper or to compare students' bibliography annotations to database abstracts" (117), which is not enough to assess the information literacy standards and outcomes as a whole. They also state that "there is an implicit expectation that associated skills will be incorporated into the curriculum" (8). Instead of "expecting" others to do this, librarians should take the initiative to approach the university community regarding collaboration, and involve themselves to a deeper extent than merely checking bibliographic citations. Edward White asserts that "writing must be seen as a whole and [that] the evaluating of writing cannot be split into a sequence of objective activities" (28); the same can be said of information literacy acquisition and assessment.

Assessment is "an integral part of the information literacy standards for student learning" (AASL 174). Attempting to determine if students are information literate (one of the questions posed by the Project SAILS team) without assessing the communication standard is merely an examination of research skills and does not address literacy in any regard. According

to Brandt, literacy learning refers to "specific occasions when people take on new understandings or capacities" (6). Information literacy instruction must include assessment of the entire information literacy acquisition process. Librarians who are responsible for information literacy instruction are those responsible for the assessment of that instruction and the student performance that results from it.

Like writing assessments, information literacy assessments should be site-based and locally controlled; there should be no need for large scale standardized assessments such as SAILS, which are actually research skills measurements purporting to be information literacy assessments. The use of such standardized assessments reduce information literacy from the realm of higher order thinking critical thinking ability that is necessary to produce and communicate new knowledge to a set of disconnected, decontextualized skills that have nothing to do with knowledge production and communication.

During the inquiry process, students "build constructs for writing, composting, and relating" and form a focus for their written expression, while they "explore information and ideas within sources to form new understanding from these ideas"(Kuhlthau 22). Brandt reiterates that "contextual perspectives tend to emphasize the relational nature of reading and writing: People build up and exercise skills through participation with others in particular contexts" (3). If "recording and sharing the processes and results of exploration is the foundation of the academic enterprise" (Francois 122) then librarians, charged with responsibility for ensuring that students are information literate, must accept that writing is part of information literacy, and as literacy sponsors, "enable, support, teach, and model" effective and purposeful writing for the benefit of students and the security of the librarian's position in the academic world. Huot asserts that "a valid procedure for assessing writing must have positive impact and consequences for the teaching and learning of writing" (*Toward*, 551); the same should be expected of information literacy assessment, and the goals of those librarians responsible for that assessment should include changes for the better in the teaching of information literacy and the lives of those students assessed on an individual basis.

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