

Efficiency or Jagged Edges

Resisting Neoliberal Logics of Assessment

by Maura Seale

The main focus of my essay is what I refer to as the dominant logics of assessment. These are the assumptions that underlie most conversations around assessment, and even the word itself. We assess in order to understand how well we are doing the things we claim to be doing, ultimately with the goal of improving or doing better. “Improve” and “better” could really mean any number of things, but I would like to suggest that when we’re talking about assessment of libraries, those words almost exclusively refer to making libraries more efficient in various ways, including removing effort, saving time, and making things easier. I am not arguing that all assessment relies on these logics – assessment of space often brings in aesthetics, for example – but a lot of the discussion around and practice of assessment does, and moreover, is unaware that it employs these logics.

This isn’t to say that we should throw out ideas of efficiency, ease, and effortlessness. Some forms of assessment are strategically or politically useful in asking for additional funding or pushing back against budget cuts. I acknowledge that there are moments when we might want to suggest that there is a return on our investments in electronic resources, monographs, services, and staffing. What underlies my essay, however, is the idea that if we must approach assessment strategically, we must simultaneously approach it critically, and that critical and strategic approaches are complementary, not contradictory. Indeed, assessment must incorporate an awareness of the political work it is performing both explicitly and implicitly.

Thinking of librarianship as a political project is central to how I approach librarianship, and in many ways, assessment might be the most important thing to grapple with politically. Assessment often deals with quantitative data, even outcome/impact-focused assessment. ACRL’s *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education* (2011), for example, which explicitly moves

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away from inputs and outputs, nonetheless emphasizes that outcomes/impacts, even those assessed qualitatively, “should be measurable.” The unquestioned and uncritical use of the language of quantification and measurement does several things. First, data is an abstraction of the social world, and as such, is necessarily incomplete, but tends to appear as and be understood as truth. Data is shaped by the questions we ask – whether they are survey questions or open-ended interview questions – and being able to measure something requires that that thing is able to be measured in some way. These assumptions and limits are inherent to any sort of data, but are not always foregrounded in discussions of either data or the assessment of that data.

Jeff Lilburn’s (2017) article, “Ideology and Audit Culture: Standardized Service Quality Surveys in Academic Libraries,” very nicely unpacks the assumptions and limits embedded in the LibQUAL+ survey of academic libraries, a widely used assessment tool, as well as the political work performed by this specific instance of assessment. He argues that “LibQUAL+ views library assessment through the lens of customer service. It emphasizes efficiency and customer satisfaction and encourages libraries to compare and rank their scores in relation to those of other libraries” (p. 103). These are the assumptions made by the survey, and the limitations inherent to the data it collects. Lilburn (2017) goes on to argue:

More specifically, this article situates the growing popularity of the standardized service quality survey LibQUAL+ within the broader setting of the pressures universities face to accept neoliberal principles and to operate more like private-sector businesses. Neoliberal principles...include an emphasis on free market competition and privatization of public services, and recast citizens as consumers. Recent scholarship examining systems of accountability and the ideological principles driving their implementation in higher education raises a number of questions about the impact of accountability systems on teaching, learning, research, faculty autonomy, and the meaning and value of university education. This article considers how these questions are relevant to library assessment practices and, in particular, to the use of one-size-fits-all assessment measures such as LibQUAL+ (p. 90-91).

Lilburn outlines the political work performed by LibQUAL+. It affirms neoliberal ideology (and this quote gives a nice rundown of what that entails) and rejects other ideologies, politics, and values. Because of its orientation towards market values, business, and consumption, neoliberal ideology is particularly invested in notions of quantification and measurement and disregards those things that cannot be quantified or measured. Because neoliberal ideology is pervasive in American discourse generally, it tends to not be questioned, which means quantitative data and measurements likewise tend not to be questioned. This is somewhat of an oversimplification – there are reams of things written about neoliberalism, quantification, market values, etc. – but Lilburn argues, and

I would agree, that neoliberal ideology is antithetical to the missions of both higher education and libraries generally. But in order to even have a discussion about this and in order to be strategic in and critical of our assessment practices, we need to develop an understanding of our work as fundamentally political. Specific politics are promoted, while other values, experiences, and practices are obscured.

I have had three recent experiences that have simultaneously articulated dominant logics of assessment and pointed to other ways to think about assessment. At the beginning of the last academic year, our assessment librarian told us that ACRL had changed its definition of research consultations so that what made an interaction a research consultation was the act of the student making an appointment. I do a disproportionate number of research consultations, and they are hugely popular with students. I had been recording long email conversations, that sometimes go across semesters or even academic years, as research consultations. All of this work is now just answering reference questions which tends not to be valued and which we don't assess using surveys and interviews. By recording my email conversations, I was trying to capture the relationships I was building with students, because relationships are the basis of so much of what we do, particularly in regards to teaching and learning. But to ACRL, the act of the student making the appointment is the important aspect to capture. This might be about the effort that the student makes to set up the appointment, but it might also be an implicit devaluing of relationships and emotional labor. Frequent conversations via email - like informal chats in hallways, saying hello to faculty you run into on campus, students waving at you when you're at the reference desk - can't really be measured or counted. Moreover, building relationships takes time and is not usually efficient.

I have been working on assessing the usability of LibGuides, both within our own library with our assessment librarian, and across our consortium with a consortium-wide committee. For the consortial study, we're going to take a two-pronged approach: usability tests and evaluation of individual guides using a rubric. All of the usability questions and all of the rubric elements basically look at how efficient the guides are in getting users to where they think they need to go. This tendency is undoubtedly tied to the borrowing of usability testing from the business world and mapping the goals of commercial websites on to educational websites. I'm not advocating for library websites or subject guides that set out to confuse the user, but what we do when we're looking for something to buy on Amazon is not the same as what we do when we have to write a research paper. I don't expect subject guides or really any library website to actually teach students how to research, since research is complicated, recursive, and can't be reduced to a series of discrete steps, but nonetheless, the assumed goal of subject guides is to make conducting research more efficient.

One of my faculty members and I were recently chatting about website evaluation and fake news. I sent him Mike Caulfield's blog post "Yes,

Digital Literacy. But Which One?" (2016). Caulfield emphasizes that "evaluation of information" isn't some abstract thing. It has to happen within a context, since that context informs its use, but it's also difficult to evaluate something when you have little to no domain knowledge. Evaluation rubrics like CRAAP and RADCAB are designed to make it easier and more efficient for students to decide whether something is good or not but evaluating information is not necessarily easy or efficient, nor can it be made that way via a rubric. Efficiency, ease, and effortlessness are embedded in so much of the language around libraries and librarianship, but what are the possibilities if we define or think about "improvement" and "better" in different ways?

What if we approached reference and research consultations through relationship-building or emotional/affective labor rather than as something to be counted? At many institutions, that is some of the most important work that those services perform. What would assessment in terms of relationship-building or affective work look like? Might that more accurately capture what we do as librarians and what students get out of meeting with or talking to librarians? Moreover, assessment that highlights relationships might show how and why they are important to the institutions and push back against notions that only things that can be measured, counted, and monetized are important.

What if we centered our subject guides not around efficiency, ease, and getting rid of effort, but around cultivating and fostering intellectual curiosity and openness? Subject guides cannot teach how to research or write a paper, but maybe they can do more to push students into what Alison Hicks (2015) in her critique of LibGuides calls the "twisting, infuriating and (occasionally) joyful process of research that is stifled by the way that most librarians structure and organize their LibGuides." I've recently tried to incorporate this exploration in library instruction sessions. I coax students to try different resources, different words, different topics, give them time to do that, and emphasize that the stakes in this particular session are nonexistent. In "Being 'lazy' and slowing down: Toward decolonizing time, our body, and pedagogy," Riyad Shajahan (2014) argues that "Slowing down is about focusing on building relationships, not about being fixed on products, but accepting and allowing for uncertainty and being at peace without knowing outcomes" (p. 10). It is about resisting market values and calls for productivity and efficiency; it is also about anti-oppressive pedagogy and returning "creativity and spontaneity" to teaching and learning (2014, p. 11).

Finally, Caulfield's post describes a study done by the Stanford History Education Group in which undergraduate students were shown a Tweet with an embedded link and more than half of them did not actually click the link in their evaluation of the Tweet. Sam Wineburg, who is a scholar of history pedagogy, is one of the authors of the study. In his work, he talks about how history education shouldn't dull or gloss "history's jagged edges" but instead suggests that historical thinking "requires us to reconcile

two contradictory positions: first, that our established modes of thinking are an inheritance that cannot be sloughed off; second, that if we make no attempt to slough them off, we are doomed to a mind-numbing presentism that reads the present onto the past” (1999, p. 493). Historical thinking requires negotiating between the familiar and the strange, and although they are not identical, information literacy and evaluation also occurs within a landscape of complexity and “jagged edges,” and is a matter of negotiating these sorts of tensions around knowing and not knowing, albeit within different spaces.

But in the interest of efficiency, effortlessness, and ease, the evaluation of information has been oversimplified and students have been told to trust an acronym rather than seek out information themselves. Rubrics, like subject guides, subvert the development of students’ ability to work through the jagged edges of internet searches and scholarly research on their own. What if we tried to assess whether library instruction contributed to students’ interest, intellectual curiosity, and exploration? How then might we talk about and teach website evaluation? How would we talk about fake news or Snopes or Twitter?

I want to suggest that we think about library services/resources in terms of exploration, complexity, jagged edges, curiosity, openness, and so on, and not be limited by the logics of efficiency, effortlessness, and ease that underlie dominant understandings of assessment. Again, I don’t know how we should assess for “jagged edges,” but unpacking the assumptions made in much of the discourse around assessment and then asking these questions are the first steps. These questions are closer to the heart of what we actually do and want to do as academic librarians. We want to have supportive and productive relationships with students. We want to teach them how to use the library and how to conduct research, but we want them to also discover it on their own, because that is a crucial element of learning and intellectual growth and moreover, it can be fun, frustrating, and empowering all at once. We want them to leave college as thoughtful, critical, and empathetic people. Academic libraries are sites of teaching, learning, and generating new knowledge. Although dominant neoliberal ideology insists that everything be efficient, easy, and monetizable, our assessment practices should not uncritically accept this framing but rather seek to identify the reasons why what we do is already important.

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