Informal Assessment for Library Middle Managers

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Library middle managers juggle a variety of responsibilities. They are responsible for supervisory tasks such as coaching and team building. They are responsible for the service their unit provides or the output of their unit. They report up the organization and are responsible for planning for efficiency and quality. They manage those who report to them as well, motivating and mobilizing. Underlying all of these responsibilities is the need for sound decision making, based on data and a steady supply of information.

The growing literature on classroom and library assessment simultaneously offers useful ideas for gathering data, and provides a bewildering array of advice and approaches regarding assessment. The terms used to describe assessment and its parts are neither intuitive nor mutually exclusive. The methods range from the simple to the statistically obscure. Stated rationales for assessment exist at a variety of levels, such as evaluating the library's impact on the education of students and measuring service quality with specialized tools or instruments.

This paper reviews types of assessment, and suggests a simplified approach that can help the middle manager gather the information needed for decision making in a thoughtful way—but without extensive infrastructure, specialized training, or the need to learn statistical-operations math! The question of whether the data thus gathered can be relied upon for decision making is addressed, and examples of assessment in action are provided. Ways the data can prove useful to the middle manager are suggested.

Formal and Informal Assessment

Assessment is a cycle; its purpose is improvement; its application is local. The cycle of assessment can be described simply as listening to the patron (collecting information), analyzing the implications of what we hear, and improving based on the input. Improvement can range from adding a piece of requested equipment to reconceptualizing the role of the library. The data collected is applicable to the context of the population and institution in which it was collected. Some data, especially that collected through formal assessment studies, can be useful beyond the confines of a single library.

There are many examples of formal assessment studies in the library literature. The implementation of the service quality survey instrument, LibQual+, in hundreds of libraries has spawned a plethora of articles, many of which apply statistical analyses to LibQual+ findings.[1] Joe Matthews in *Library Assessment in Higher Education*, cites and examines numerous assessment studies from the perspective of how their findings support or do not support a case for the library having an impact on its users. Topics include reference, the physical library, resources, learning outcomes, and more.[2]

Formal assessment is characterized by structure. A focus group run by a facilitator following a script is an example of formal assessment. A survey that includes questions that have been pretested and refined to elicit certain clearly delineated information and that has been administered to a random sample is another example. Managers are aware of these techniques, know they are in wide use, and yet may feel that the effort to implement them is beyond their time and resources. Formal assessment is, for the most part, unnecessary for the purposes of middle management.

The methods of formal assessment can be simplified rendered informal, but remain useful. Informal assessment can employ a quick and dirty survey to solicit a straw vote or a range of opinions. The formal focus group can be modified into a discussion group around a table. In addition there are other techniques that are by nature informal, such as one-on-one interactions at the reference desk, or gathering input through comment forms. The easel technique featured in *Studying Students*, where a flip chart is set up in the library to gather patron comments on a question, is another example.[3]

Informal assessment, like formal, is a process of listening, learning, and changing. Characteristically, informal assessment is fairly easy to conduct, needs no great time line or extensive preparation, and requires minimal resources. It can generate more participation than more time-consuming techniques (time is saved not just for the

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assessor but also for the assessee) and be effectively used for investigating single issues or simply to gather feedback. It would not include complex statistical analyses.

Until recently the term "informal assessment" was rarely found in library assessment literature until recently. It is now seen most often in the literature on information literacy and higher education assessment. *A Practical Guide to Information Literacy Assessment for Academic Librarians* contains, for example, a chapter on informal assessment, defining it "as the specific techniques of observing, questioning, and self-reflecting."[4] Higher education more broadly has long been familiar with the informal assessment techniques of Angelo and Cross' Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs).[5]

In management, the concept of informal assessment is seen in the literature on continuous quality improvement. In fact, according to Huba and Freed, "principles of continuous improvement parallel the themes of Classroom Assessment, and CQI techniques are very similar to CATs."[6] Only recently have the phrase and concept of informal assessment crept into the library assessment literature, most notably in the University of Rochester Library's ethnographic studies and their replicators.[7]

A Process for Informal Assessment for Middle Managers

There are many ways to express the cycle that is assessment. Some have proposed a look-think-act routine.[8] Erika Rogers, in the 2009 ACRL conference workshop, "Empowering Librarians through User-Centered Design" suggested "Ask, Listen, Watch," which was also ascribed to the University of Rochester Library at the session "Studying Your Students." Here I propose characterizing the process as "Ask, Listen, Watch and Act"–a model most closely fitting recommended managerial practices.

Ask. This can be as simple as asking patrons or staff "Are things going well?" Or it can be a more specific question to obtain feedback on such topics as contemplated changes, or getting a sense of what patrons or staff value in the current setup. Contrary to formal assessment or even the less formal problem/solution-oriented action research, there need not be a big question to be answered or problem to be solved. There is of course some kind of question, but not the kind that in research presupposes a hypothesis, or that in action research presupposes a problem.

Listen /Watch. "Listen" is probably the piece of advice most often given to middle managers. The manager can listen in order to answer a question, or set up a context where listening is the object (such as the discussion group). The key to listening effectively is to do so without fitting the response into a preconceived or desired framework. One way to counteract that tendency is to both listen and watch: Is what staff or patrons say corroborated by what they do? Observing actions can help put what you've heard into a context, or provide ways to interpret what has been said.

Act. There are many possible follow-up actions after the initial "Ask, Listen, Watch." Here are a few: analyze and look for patterns; speculate as to how this data relates to previous or alternate data; triangulate (use multiple input methods so that you are not relying on one or two sources); interpret and make sense out of the data; delve deeper if necessary (what seems like it does not fit, what further data might be needed); and improve (use the data and what you have learned to improve a service, to improve communication and training, to do better).

This process embodies an approach to assessment that enables a simple and ideally ongoing collection of data, a prerequisite to effective decision making. Although the Evidence-Based Library and Information Practice movement seems to sneer at this level of data not derived from research literature,[9] the principles of Evidence-Based *Management* reinforce the concept: create an environment where people are comfortable telling the truth, base decisions on facts, experiment, and don't do something just because common wisdom says it is the best way.[10]

Using the Process: Examples from the Field

Ask. Act.

A number of examples from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) libraries are included here. To get a sense of which services were most valued in one of the branch libraries, the branch librarian drafted a short "impact survey." Participants responded to such probes as "I regularly view the exhibits in the library," "library webpages have been the source for lots of information I've needed," and "other ways the library has or could have a positive impact." Fourteen surveys were collected. The open-ended question in particular provided valuable feedback, including the surprising information from three students about a perceived lack of value of the new books display and webpages. This feedback led to branch staff marketing the value of browsing new books, and the librarian initiating a discussion with a small group of students on student use of the webpages.

With budget cuts, there is pressure to cut the collections, especially serials, and especially print serials. To get feedback from a population of students who might continue to rely on the image quality of print, the subject librarian gave a print versus electronic preference survey to students in the School of Architecture. Results showed that for books the preference of a sizeable majority (77 percent) was for print, but for journals only 45 percent preferred print. There were 116 responses. The findings lent support to a more cautious evaluation of the perceived value of the two formats for the architecture discipline, rather than the presumption that electronic is the preferred format which is applied to science and increasingly to other disciplines as well.

Listen. Act.

To create an opportunity for student input, the author set up a student advisory group composed of six students meeting two or three times a semester over coffee to discuss the library. Many suggestions have surfaced and been subsequently implemented, including exhibits of student work organized by the students. The group has also provided additional input on data from other sources. For instance, when statistics on internal use went down, the group suggested that students were reshelving, despite notices to the contrary. This resulted in further marketing, as well as putting book trucks labeled "place books here for reshelving" into the stacks.

Listen.

Library staff solicited user comments by means of a flip chart set up in a public space. This resulted in some interactions among patrons as well as feedback for the library, as patrons played off the comments of others. This could be seen as the equivalent of in-person blog comments. Although it has thus far resulted in few concrete follow-ups, the feedback has provided insight into such topics as students' favorite places in the library and their favorite magazines. One unexpected favorite place—the restroom—is now, as a result of this feedback, being used to highlight facts on sustainability!

To determine what aspects of access and delivery services (circulation desk, patron-initiated borrowing from network libraries, stacks, interlibrary loan) are important to users, the head of the unit asked her student library workers and recorded the answers. She then converted the aspects that they mentioned multiple times into poll questions for the library webpages to see if user responses matched those of the student staff. Here is an example of one of the poll questions:

> What is the primary reason that you use the Document Delivery Services (DDS)?
>
> a) Finding books/documents for class
> b) Finding books for personal research
> c) I have never used the DDS

Watch. Act.

Two of the library's three branches make use of a "no" log to record patron interactions where staff have not been able to provide what the patron requested. Each entry notes the topic, the rationale for the "no," alternatives supplied, and the patron's reaction. The patron's reaction is what puts this method in the "Watch" category. If the patron is okay with the alternative offered, there is presumed to be less urgency to make a change. Branch staff have used the log notations to trigger some equipment and software purchases as well as to reexamine and sometimes change policies. It has also served as a training tool for student workers, and as a quality control mechanism.

The library has an ongoing usability committee that has conducted several studies. Each study entails watching a single student respond to a set of questions reflecting what the committee has identified as items students might look for on the Web. As is typical for usability studies, five students is deemed a sufficient number on which to base decisions. The results suggest that there is a difference in undergraduate and graduate student navigation skills, which is important for Web designers to keep in mind. Several changes have been made to the website based on the web-searching behavior of the students in the studies.

Watch.

Statistics on use provide another way to watch, given that they are an indicator of behavior. Which databases get the most use? Which webpages are frequently accessed? Is in-house use going down but e-reserve use going up? To the extent that we use statistics to glean information about our patrons—what sources they value, what branches they frequent—statistics are a viable means of listening-and-watching and hence a part of the informal assessment proposed here. They can be powerful as we look for patterns, compare behavior over time, or compare one group with another. Simple statistics that include averages, high/low scores, and range of scores can help with interpretation.

Value of Informal Assessment

The examples above show the primary use of informal assessment: to obtain feedback by listening and watching. It can help us keep our fingers on the pulse of how staff or patrons are responding to our policies and procedures. Informal assessment provides a feasible approach to touch base and gather input on how staff or patrons are doing, how they think we are doing, what they want, and how they value what we do. It can point to something that needs to change, or verify that something is working well.

Informal assessment can provide multiple data points. If enough data streams are generated through multiple assessments, then the aggregate can be used with confidence and applied to decision making. Triangulation of data is generally accepted to be an effective and reliable mode of analysis. For instance, patron comments on not being able to find books on the shelf might be combined with statistics on an increasing number of books declared missing, and further combined with staff observations of misshelving to lead to a comprehensive shelf-reading project, or even to a more formal availability study.

Informal assessment can function in a variety of ways. It can serve as a diagnostic assessment, as in the case of usability tests. It can be used to provide the preliminary information on which to base more extended projects, such

as the MIT photo diary study's use to inform an overhaul of the MIT library's discovery tools.[11] It can also be used to develop definitions and conceptual categories on which to base a more extensive formal assessment. It was used in this way at Brock University, in examining in-library study behaviors.[12]

Limitations of Informal Assessment

Although limitations have been alluded to above, it is important to stress that there *are* limitations. Lacking the infrastructure of statistical operations to address issues such as reliability and validity, other approaches to determining whether data is actionable must be considered and used. Rather than asking whether results are valid and reliable, we should ask whether such data is useful. Others working with local, non-generalizable data have suggested that rigor be established not through traditional means but through elements of "trustworthiness," specifically "credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability."[13]

Many practicing librarians are satisfied with assessment and data that is "good enough"—not perfect, but good enough. Voltaire's maxim that the perfect is the enemy of the good does not mean, however, that reliance on what is often referred to as anecdotal evidence produces sound decision making. There is in fact some reason for the wariness with which we regard anecdotal or informal data. James Bearden, SUNY Geneseo Department of Sociology, notes that people tend to believe anecdotes, despite statistical evidence to the contrary, and that we are prone to take an individual's story and generalize to an entire population.[14]

Following this thread of reasoning, it is easier to fall into the error of seeing what we want or expect to see if we rely on anecdotal data. For this reason it is prudent, as mentioned above, to use multiple sources of data—to triangulate—in order to formulate conclusions and make decisions. Triangulation is in fact the key to keeping ourselves honest in terms of what we listen to and what conclusions we draw. Common sense plays a role as well. One complaint (a typical anecdote) about slow log-ins *can* be cause for action, at least when combined with the verifiable data of the actual time required for log-in.

Sharing Results of Informal Assessment (Up, Down, Across, Out)

Middle managers not only listen, they also share what they have heard. They communicate up, down, and across in the organization. They provide upper administration with data; they communicate to their employees what they have learned about patron needs and behavior; they share with their colleagues input received on topics of mutual interest. The streams of data coming from managers throughout the library form a multifaceted lens through which to view the library's services and value to the patron.

Arguably it is also valuable for the results of informal assessment to be reported beyond the local context in which it was collected, and for which it holds the most relevance. The authors of *Studying Students* note that the data they collected applies to their institution, and should be viewed as local data. Nonetheless their study and the ethnographic methods they brought to libraries excited the imagination of many librarians, and brought to the attention of the library community a set of processes with which most were unfamiliar.

The prejudice against reporting informal assessment may stem from the sense that it is not solid research, and therefore not worth sharing in the literature. This attitude is exemplified by Charles R. McClure and Peter Hernon in *Library and Information Science Research: Perspectives and Strategies for Improvement*.[15] They declare that studies limited to a "single library at a point in time" are of "limited applicability beyond the local library."[16] However, multiple anecdotes from multiple institutions can be triangulated, and may lead to perspectives that can be applied beyond the local.

Conclusion

This article acknowledges and reinforces the importance, value, and contribution of informal, continuous assessment for library management purposes. Assessment is often seen as burdensome and time-consuming. Assessment will be more likely to occur if the method is basic. The preconception that assessment involves time-consuming processes and statistical analyses is enough to give pause to any manager. To achieve the ongoing feedback that is the basis of sound decision-making, the process has to be something each and every one of our managers does as a matter of course.

The commitment to informal assessment can be generated organizationally in a variety of ways. At UNLV the process started with a presentation by the assessment librarian to a group of middle managers. It grew manager by manager as individuals saw its usefulness. Once the concept—along with its limitations and techniques—is understood, those responsible for library projects, programs, and units can implement to the extent they feel warranted. The mandate of upper administration should be for data-based decision making, not for formal or informal assessment per se.

Informal assessment offers an approach that is doable given the time and expertise constraints of many middle managers. Asking patrons and staff to share their perceptions is a necessary step for improving our operations. The process of Ask, Listen, Watch, and Act focuses the middle manager on the basic ways of generating patron or staff feedback. Obtaining feedback, triangulating data or

otherwise addressing the need for trustworthy and useful data, and sharing the data and insights thus obtained with upper administration, with staff, and with colleagues both at the local library and beyond—these are the ingredients for developing the culture of assessment, promoted by Lakos and Phipps among others, that can transform an organization.[17]

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