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# “I Felt Like Such a Freshman:” Reflections on DePaul University Library’s Assessment in Action Project

Heather Jagman, *DePaul University*



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## CHAPTER 1

# “I Felt Like Such a Freshman:”

Reflections on DePaul University  
Library’s Assessment in Action  
Project

*Heather Jagman*

DePaul University  
hjagman@depaul.edu

DEPAUL UNIVERSITY IS A diverse, urban, Catholic institution located in Chicago, Illinois. The University is committed to the city, and encourages faculty and students to think of Chicago as an extension of their classroom and learning community. Exposure to the city and urban life begins immediately after students arrive on campus; all incoming first year students are required to enroll in either Discover Chicago or Explore Chicago, a “First Year Experience” course also known as the “Chicago Quarter.” As the names imply, these classes focus on some aspect of life in Chicago and provide students with an opportunity to experience the city through field visits to different neighborhoods. Classes tour a variety of places from cemeteries and science labs to ethnic grocery stores and museums. The city becomes a laboratory for classes to explore a variety of topics and issues through the disciplinary lens of the faculty instructor. These courses are team-led. Each team consists of a faculty instructor, a staff professional, and student mentor. In addition to this academic component, the

Chicago Quarter also includes a “Common Hour,” led by a student mentor with assistance from the staff professional. The Common Hour provides peer support while introducing students to a variety of topics designed to support student success, such as understanding diversity, financial literacy, wellness and academic success skills. In addition to having the support of the staff professional and faculty member, the student mentors are required to enroll in a series of classes introducing them to peer education theory and practice. These courses provide the mentors with information on college student development as well as a peer support network of their own. Student Affairs staff from our Office of New Student and Family Engagement provide the curriculum and instruction for these courses.

In 2013 I worked with colleagues from DePaul’s Writing Center, Academic Advising, New Student and Family Engagement, and the Center for Students with Disabilities to design a Common Hour lesson plan and associated library assignment to be delivered and graded by Chicago Quarter student mentors as part of the Discover/ Explore Chicago curriculum. As co-curricular units charged with supporting student success, we wanted to design a lesson plan that would increase students’ confidence and sense of belonging as well as cultivate certain habits of mind, like being curious and seeking expertise. Our hope was to build students’ identity as scholars, and address their anxiety regarding new spaces and experiences. We also needed to replace an outmoded and very didactic library assignment focused more on where to click than how to think.

Our new assignment combined action and reflection. We asked students to consider a topic of personal or academic interest, use the library discovery tool to identify an item in our holdings, physically find the item in the library, check it out, and afterward respond to a series of reflection questions in the form of a brief essay to be graded by the peer mentors. We intentionally left out any instructions on searching (or even locating) the online library catalog. We wanted students to experiment, try searching on their own—possibly not get things exactly right at first—and learn from the experience. One of the hopes of the original assignment was that it would also increase students’ confidence and sense of belonging by giving them a chance to get out of their comfort zones, perhaps struggle a bit, but see that they would eventually be able to succeed. In reflecting on their success, students would then articulate to themselves that they can be persistent and successful.

In 2013 when we conducted this assessment, 33% of DePaul’s first year students were first generation college students, and neither parent had a college degree. Stacy Brinkman, Katie Gibson, and Jenny Presnell note that first-generation students perceive themselves as being outsiders, and reported that this feeling created stress, because they “simply assumed that the library was one more instance of academic cluelessness.”<sup>1</sup> Supporting first generation college students is a critical component of DePaul’s mission, and the Library wants to foster an environment that helps these students succeed.

Academic libraries can be intimidating to many students—it’s not just first generation students who struggle. Project Information Literacy reports that in general, first year students feel overwhelmed by college level research assignments and are intimidated by the amount of information they are dealing with for the first time.<sup>2</sup> Getting students ‘over themselves’ and into the physical library can facilitate student retention and success. Furthermore, research from the University of Minnesota suggests that first year students who use the library at least once during their first semester have higher grade point averages than their peers, and are more likely to persist into the next semester.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to completing a physical task, students in our program reflected on that experience in the form of a brief essay. Reflection papers are an increasingly popular assignment at DePaul. Like making use of library resources, writing a reflection paper might be something students would be expected to do prior to formal library instruction in their first year writing program. Mary Ryan argues that active reflection on such activities helps people to understand the context of their learning and use this knowledge “to re-imagine and ultimately improve future experience.”<sup>4</sup>

## Creating the Assignment

Creating an assignment that combined action and reflection presented a number of opportunities and challenges. We had to think carefully about what we wanted students to address in their reflection papers. Would we be able to tell from their responses how the library contributes to their success? What could we, as a team, learn about how the library contributes to student learning and engagement? It helped us to first consider our

learning objectives, and then create our assignment. It was helpful to be very explicit in our instructions to the students. We found that if you ask students to explain how the library “supports their success as academic learners,” they will do their best to tell you.

Asking students to comment on their library experiences in the form of a reflection essay (guided by our questions) provided us with an authentic and direct measure of whether (and how) they learned to find what they were looking for, what they noticed about our library, and how they felt about it. Not only was this interesting for us as researchers, but we also found that the act of writing a reflective response seemed to provide an additional, metacognitive experience for the students. Our assignment gave students an experience, and an opportunity to reflect on that experience, and plan for future success. (In our analysis, we noticed a number of students articulated their plans to use library materials and services in the future.)

The assignment was designed to be distributed and graded by a peer mentor. Because students were writing for their peers, we felt these new student voices and concerns were likely more authentic than they would have been had they been writing for a librarian. Students did not know until they were offered the opportunity to participate in our study that a research team was interested in what they had to say. However, because our research team was not connected to these students or classes directly, we had to make special arrangements and work with our local Institutional Review Board in order to collect and analyze the student artifacts. Our study was granted an exemption. The student essays would be anonymized prior to reaching us, so we would have no way of identifying the students. Our lack of direct connection to these students presented another problem. How could we encourage the peer mentors to help us by recruiting their Common Hour students to participate? We had no relationship with them. Prior to applying to the Assessment in Action (AiA) project, our team had consisted of representatives from our co-curricular units. However, we realized that in order for our AiA project to work well, we would need to invite someone from the Office of New Student and Family Engagement (NSFE) to join our team. NSFE staff were able to recruit peer mentors who in turn would recruit their students to participate during the weekly meetings of their Peer Education Theory and Practice classes.

## Methodology

We decided to assess the student essays by applying a rubric focused on four outcomes based on the Association of American Colleges and Universities VALUE rubric for Information Literacy<sup>5</sup>:

- Students will visit the DePaul University libraries and gain familiarity with the physical attributes of the libraries.
- Students will complete a successful search for material and check out at least one item.
- Students will identify and articulate novel features of the academic library relative to their prior experience with libraries.
- Students will articulate at least one way the library can support their success as university learners.

Deciding on definitions that would enable us to rank each outcome from 1 to 4 wasn't as easy as we thought it. Not every outcome authentically lent itself to four discrete levels of achievement. We may have made things more complicated than necessary, but this was our first time attempting such an assessment, and we wanted to make sure that we had plenty of options. Looking back, I would recommend focusing on assessing just one or two outcomes at a time. If you are interested in assessing multiple outcomes, consider creating an assessment cycle that allows you to rotate through outcomes on a regular basis.

## Establishing Inter-Rater Agreement

Since our AiA team worked together to write the assignment and develop the rubric, one might think establishing inter-rater reliability would be a snap, but it was not without challenges. As we read the essays, we needed to regularly remind ourselves that we could only rate the evidence that students provided. It is possible that some students actually succeeded (or failed), but were not very good at communicating their experience in writing. Enlisting non-librarians to read and rate the reflection essays was enlightening, and it also illuminated how differently things can look to us through our “librarian-eyes.” My colleagues did not always recognize when a student described something that was more or less a library impossibility (like a student reporting that they found a book about flute and flute playing in the 815's) and rated the student's performance quite differently than I did. We worked to establish inter-rater agreement by reading seven essays

together and then discussing our ratings and adjusting our definitions (and even the rubric) accordingly. Team members then read and rated twenty-five essays on their own. I read the entire collection of ninety-seven essays, and then met with each rater to discuss our ratings and come to consensus. I don't think this would have been possible if we'd had any more essays or if the essays had been much longer than one or two pages.

Furthermore, reading the entire collection of essays provided me with an opportunity to observe patterns and consider how we might apply alternate methods of analysis in the future. Employing the rubric allowed us to demonstrate that students were able to succeed and to what degree<sup>6</sup>, but it did not give us any way to describe the students' learning processes. Our interest in understanding student behavior ultimately led to another research project in which a colleague and I used Nvivo Qualitative Analysis software to code the text and look for patterns in how students approached the library, overcame hurdles and described their emotional state. The ability to extract quotes from the essays in a meaningful way makes it easier to tell your story to your stakeholders.

## Notes

1. Stacy Brinkman, Katie Gibson, and Jenny Presnell, "When the Helicopters Are Silent: The Information Seeking Strategies of First-Generation College Students," paper presented at the Association of College and Research Libraries Conference, Indianapolis, IN, April 2013, accessed November 22, 2014, [http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org/acrl/files/content/conferences/confsandpreconfs/2013/papers/BrinkmanGibsonPresnell\\_When.pdf](http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org/acrl/files/content/conferences/confsandpreconfs/2013/papers/BrinkmanGibsonPresnell_When.pdf)
2. Alison J. Head, "Learning the Ropes: How Freshmen Conduct Course Research Once They Enter College" (Project Information Literacy, December 4, 2013), accessed March 4, 2014, [http://projectinfolit.org/images/pdfs/pil\\_2013\\_freshmenstudy\\_fullreport.pdf](http://projectinfolit.org/images/pdfs/pil_2013_freshmenstudy_fullreport.pdf)
3. Krista M. Soria, Jan Fransen and Shane Nackerud, "Library Use and Undergraduate Student Outcomes: New Evidence for Students' Retention and Academic Success," *portal: Libraries & the Academy*, 13, no. 2 (2013): 147–164.
4. Mary Ryan, "Conceptualizing and Teaching Discursive and Performative Reflection in Higher Education," *Studies in Continuing Education* 34, no. 2 (October 7, 2011): 209, doi:10.1080/0158037X.2011.611799
5. "Information Literacy VALUE Rubric," Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2010, accessed July 10, 2013, <http://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/information-literacy>

6. For more information about our findings, see Heather Jagman, Lisa Davidson, Lauri Dietz, Jodi Faulk, and Antonietta Fitzpatrick, " 'I Felt like Such a Freshman': Creating Library Insiders," accessed June 25, 2015, [http://works.bepress.com/heather\\_jagman/7](http://works.bepress.com/heather_jagman/7)