



Learning at the Reference Desk: A Pilot Project to Align Reference Transactions with University Learning Outcomes



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INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

In re-imagining libraries, their value and impact with stakeholders, librarians are challenged to conjure up new, innovative ways to convey what is important, relevant, and meaningful. In some instances, this innovation results in developing new services such as a learning commons or a technology petting zoo. In other situations, innovative thinking requires re-examining what libraries already do through a different lens or perspective. In essence, librarians need to experiment with different perspectives, metaphors, or narratives in order to discover new opportunities to value, market, or convey meaning about library services. These new perspectives can create fresh and engaging ways of describing the library.

The narratives associated with libraries are indeed changing. We are seeing libraries described as makerspaces (Fisher, 2012); gaming spaces (Harris & Rice, 2008); and even blacksmithing, butchering and bowling spaces (Fletcher, 2013). Within all of these narratives associated with libraries resides the core but often under-articulated value of learning: *The library as learning space*. Learning as a perspective or metaphor offers a potential framework to guide innovation and change within libraries. Learning also unifies the multiple stories, services, and ideas that contribute to the overall narrative of each library.

There are many different narratives that make up the academic library. Each narrative that librarians embrace helps illuminate what libraries value and how we describe that value. Within this multiplicity of narratives, there are complementary, supplemental, and dominant threads that form the interwoven story of the library and how others perceive it. Some threads define as well as constrain our profession (i.e. the book narrative). A deep narrative within academic libraries is

the research narrative that describes our collections, services and instruction. These multilayered threads help form and complete the story of the library. As librarians, we need to do a better job teasing out these library narratives in order to discover hidden connections and innovative ways to communicate our value and impact. The less ambiguous our message, the more clear our connections become to the narratives that are integral and important to our patrons.

The learning narrative is a common thread of particular significance to academic libraries and their users. As a central theme of libraries, learning has not always been well articulated to our patrons in meaningful or coherent ways. Learning is a thread that stretches beyond the library and is woven strongly into national conversations about the value of the baccalaureate college degree. As academic libraries, we also are very concerned about conveying our impact on student achievement, success, and retention. These national learning narratives often coalesce around competency-based outcomes such as critical thinking and lifelong learning. Many universities have adopted or adapted national student learning outcomes such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AACU) Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) essential learning outcomes (<http://www.aacu.org/leap/vision.cfm>) or the Lumina Foundation's *Degree Qualifications Profile* (2012) into their degree expectations for their graduates.

The University of Idaho has also incorporated this national learning narrative within its institutional efforts to measure student success and achievement by creating its own set of campus-wide learning outcomes for undergraduate students. These campus-wide outcomes, based on the AACU's LEAP essential learning outcomes are titled *Learning Matters* (<http://www.uidaho.edu/learningoutcomes>). These outcomes emphasize areas where the University of Idaho strives to have an educational impact on undergraduate students and are intended to be incorporated into the overall student learning experience at the university. The *Learning Matters* outcomes are articulated under these broad categories:

- Learn and Integrate
- Think and Create
- Communicate
- Clarify Purpose and Perspective
- Practice Citizenship

In addition to being used as a curriculum planning and assessment point for classroom instruction, these learning outcomes offer a potentially rich framework for the University of Idaho Library to re-envision

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the measures used to describe library services to our educational partners. Oakleaf (2012) emphasizes the need for librarians to “explore the existing and potential contribution of the library” to institutional learning goals and outcomes.” By including national or campus learning outcomes as a framework to develop potential measures, libraries create an opportunity to better articulate their educational impact, especially since students are being held accountable for these learning outcomes. This criteria also resonate significantly louder in the ears of campus administrators, students, parents, and faculty.

MEASURING THE LEARNING NARRATIVE AT THE REFERENCE DESK

The evidence libraries gather determines the story libraries are able to construct and convey. It is very difficult for academic libraries to build a compelling narrative that resonates with fellow educators from traditional references statistics grouped by *reference*, *directional* or *technical* criteria. The challenge for academic libraries is to consider reframing our questions, measures, and metrics to better articulate the educational impact within the learning communities to which we contribute. The recent *The Value of Academic Libraries* (Oakleaf, 2010) report asks libraries to begin considering other outcomes of significance such as student enrollment, student retention, student achievement, student learning, and the student experience (Oakleaf, 2010). Unfortunately, these new areas are not necessarily directly compatible with traditional library measures such as circulation counts, article downloads, or reference statistics. Imagination is required in devising strategies to gather evidence that will communicate the true impact of libraries.

National and campus learning outcomes offer a framework for libraries to begin articulating their value in new and innovative ways. Libraries are not just book spaces or research spaces but also learning spaces. These national learning outcomes provide a common language familiar to the educational communities to which libraries contribute. Using this shared understanding and language, libraries can construct more evocative stories that contribute to a wider narrative about learning. For example, libraries might consider talking about their online and physical spaces from within a learning outcomes perspective. In this context, a library learning commons with its technology and dynamic learning spaces might be seen as a contributor to the University of Idaho's learning outcomes *Communication, Practice Citizenship, and Learn and Integrate*. A library's online and print collections may be considered resources for students to *Clarify Purpose and Perspective* through exposure to diverse and global perspectives. The additional context offered by learning outcomes creates a more compelling story for libraries when reporting usage statistics such as headcounts, database logins, or gate counts. By incorporating and translating learning outcomes within patron interactions, academic libraries are then able to make a persuasive statement to university administrators, accreditors, or parents about how our spaces and resources support campus learning outcomes.

One area in libraries that often has significant patron interaction is the reference desk. This is also a venue in the library where many librarians would agree that some types of learning occur through one-on-one interactions with librarians. Libraries often gather data about these interactions and traditionally categorize these transactions by question type, time spent answering the question, and time of day. Unfortunately, these traditional measures do little to connect to the learning aspect that might occur during these reference encounters. These traditional reference transaction measures, about question type and time, support data needed to make reference staffing and scheduling decisions rather than specifically tied learning or anything else. Without proper evidence, it is difficult for libraries to say that reference encounters might allow patrons to practice critical thinking skills, build information literacy competencies, or support any other aspect of learning that happens during these patron interactions. When students interact with reference librarians learning to search a database, evaluate sources, or use information ethically, the library is contributing to the student learning

outcomes. However, to best articulate that value, new reference measures should be developed and considered. This article presents a case for using university or national learning outcomes as means to better articulate the impact of reference services.

THE LITERATURE ON MEASURING STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES AT THE REFERENCE DESK

Much has been written about the evaluation of reference service and the teaching and learning nature of the reference interaction. Elmborg (2002) implied that reference interactions are a form of teaching and Green and Peach (2003) designed a tool to assess teaching at the reference desk. Studies by Jacoby and O'Brien (2005) and Gremmels and Lehmann (2007) contributed further proof of the impact of student learning during reference interactions, and both studies suggested that the subject deserved more attention.

Not so much has been written about mapping reference transactions to university learning outcomes. This is most likely due to the relatively recent drive to prove the value of the library within the university. Dugan and Hernon (2002) were early advocates for assessing student learning outcomes in academic libraries instead of simply collecting data on inputs. They concluded that measuring learning outcomes provided a different perspective on the library's contributions to university's educational mission and a better method of demonstrating the library's value as a partner in the learning process.

Gerlich and Berard (2010) developed a model for extracting qualitative data from reference transactions, the READ (Reference Effort Assessment Data) scale. The six-point scale measures the skills, knowledge, and techniques used by librarian during a reference transactions. Their study of READ implementation at 14 academic libraries concluded that gathering and interpreting qualitative data could transform the value of reference statistics. Librarians at Colorado State University - Pueblo also attempted a more qualitative tracking of reference transactions by integrating the READ scale and the university's student learning outcomes into the Colorado State Library's reference tracking program, DART (Huddock & Sullivan, 2011).

This pilot project is inspired by the READ (Gerlich & Berard, 2010) and DART (Huddock & Sullivan, 2011) projects that explored more meaningful options for capturing transactions at the reference service point. Taking Dugan and Hernon's (2002) charge to better connect academic libraries with learning outcomes, the researchers chose to emphasize learning outcomes in their reference in-take form redesign.

PILOT STUDY METHODOLOGY

This pilot study consisted of redesigning the library's reference transaction intake form to better reflect actions at the reference desk that might contribute to learning outcomes. The project consisted of three phases. The first phase was to conduct a preliminary evaluation of reference data from the 2014 fall semester to determine potential learning outcomes that might be occurring during reference encounters. The second phase was to design the pilot reference intake form based on the learning outcomes discovered in Phase One and run the pilot project at the reference desk. Phase Two of the pilot was “live” from October to December during the 2015 fall semester. The third phase was to evaluate the data gathered during the three months the pilot project was active.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Enrollment at the University of Idaho is typically 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students a year. Annually the University of Idaho Library sees over 400,000 visitors walk through its doors. The library reference services handles an average of around 9000 transactions yearly with librarians staffing reference services over 50 h a week.

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