Developing Library Learning Outcomes: Reflecting on Instruction across the Library

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Abstract

In this paper, we will discuss the process by which we mapped, reviewed, and revised our library learning outcomes. We started by surveying all library staff who teach students in classes, workshops, one-on-one sessions, and other venues on a regular basis. We wanted to be as inclusive as possible while limiting our scope to recurring instruction with measurable learning goals, even if those goals were not previously articulated as outcomes. We mapped those outcomes to our existing library learning outcomes to identify strengths and gaps between course- and library-level outcomes. We then organized the course level outcomes into new themes. Throughout our process, we referred to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy, the Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy, and several digital literacy frameworks. This paper will include the final library learning outcomes we developed, as well as specific examples we provided to help library staff identify how the outcomes apply to their specific instruction. We will discuss our plans for managing the annual assessment of these learning outcomes through our Library Assessment and Research Committee. Last, we will share our experience communicating the impact of our new outcomes with stakeholders both within the library and across the university.

Introduction or Background

Like many academic libraries, our teaching and instruction efforts at DePaul University Library support a wide range of academic departments, introductory and advanced courses, and multiple face-to-face and online formats. We offer programmatic instruction in foundational courses, advanced subject-specific instruction through our liaison program, and specialized workshops and training in a variety of information, primary source, and digital literacy topics. Despite—or perhaps because of—this diversity in instruction, the library recognized a need for a set of holistic learning outcomes to provide a strategic direction for our instruction and assessment efforts across the library.

During the 2017–18 academic year, DePaul University engaged in a campus-wide effort to review program-level learning outcomes in all academic and co-curricular areas. The goal of this project was to ensure all programs had a set of 3–6 learning outcomes that were clearly articulated, measurable, and mapped to the curriculum. This provided the perfect opportunity for the university library to revise our learning outcomes with support from our university's Office of Teaching, Learning and Assessment and buy-in from both library administration and library staff across departments. This process enabled all library staff to reflect on our learning objectives in *every* course we teach in the library, to incorporate professional standards and frameworks in our learning outcomes, and to identify gaps in our outcomes and instruction. It also allowed us to articulate the value of the library to both academic and co-curricular areas throughout the university and demonstrate how the library contributes to student learning.

The library serves on the university's Assessment Advisory Board, which includes representation from all academic departments, as well as the University Center for Writing Based Learning and Student Affairs. The library also serves on the newly formed Co-Curricular Learning Outcomes Assessment Committee, which includes the University Center for Writing Based Learning, Supplemental Instruction, Financial Fitness, and others. Our unique position on both the academic and co-curricular assessment groups has raised awareness of the assessment and instruction work we do in the library. It has also provided us the opportunity to share our experiences, to learn about assessment efforts across the university, and has given us a seat at the table to make decisions about university-wide assessment practices. As part of our membership on those committees, we are required to maintain program-level learning outcomes and to complete an assessment of each learning outcome at least once during our ten-year accreditation cycle. The revision of our learning

outcomes reinforced our commitment to serving on those committees, outcome-based instruction, and ongoing assessment of our work.

Literature Review
Why Write Learning Outcomes?
Learning outcomes have become an integral part of library instruction. There is a wealth of literature on the importance of establishing course-level learning outcomes. Megan Oakleaf, for example, argues, "Learning outcomes are essential for good teaching; they establish the content of instruction, provide a framework for designing pedagogy, and drive meaningful assessments."[1] Learning outcomes ensure instruction programs follow a meaningful plan and have an applied purpose for the student.

They also provide an opportunity to clearly articulate the purpose of the library instruction program to students, faculty, and administrators across the university. These conversations, as well as library participation in institutional assessment efforts, raise awareness of library instruction and assessment and demonstrate their value. Instructors who are familiar with "definitions of information literacy of any type are much more likely to incorporate information literacy concepts into their teaching and to assess for information literacy competencies."[2] In this effort, it is critical that librarians continue to facilitate conversations with faculty about the value of information literacy instruction. Framing our work through learning outcomes provides an opportunity to do so in terms with which faculty are familiar.

Finally, the development of learning outcomes and assessment of information literacy competencies is increasingly required for accreditation purposes. Sanders analyzed the role of information literacy in regional accrediting bodies and found that they "all seem to place a high value on the skills associated with information literacy."[3] In addition to the implicit value of learning outcomes instruction and assessment thereof for libraries and their instruction programs, there may also be external requirements that libraries continue to pursue these endeavors. Ziegenfuss, Harp, and Borrelli suggest that "institutional culture and context" has a direct impact "on the ability of an organization to come together around designing, assessing, and disseminating SLOs."[4] The inclusion of information literacy in accreditation requirements has increased institutional pressure to develop and assess learning outcomes in library instruction, as well as related content within the courses, providing opportunities for librarians to collaborate with faculty in course and assignment development.

How to Write Learning Outcomes
We set out to revise our learning outcomes at a time of significant change in the way our professional organizations define and implement learning strategies. We knew we wanted to bring in three tenants of literacy to learning outcomes: information literacy, primary source literacy, and digital literacy. When the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education was released in 2015, librarians got to work identifying how to translate these knowledge practices or dispositions into learning outcomes. In the introduction to the framework, the task force explicitly states, "Neither the knowledge practices nor the dispositions that support each concept are intended to prescribe what local institutions should do in using the Framework; each library and its partners on campus will need to deploy these frames to best fit their own situation, including designing learning outcomes."[5] As such, we looked to the framework as a guide and reference, but adapted it to our local needs. We similarly brought in examples from the Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy and the digital literacy learning outcomes listed in our university's College of Computing and Digital Media programs.

While there is no single recommended procedure for developing learning outcomes in libraries, there are a few helpful resources available. Falcone and McCartin recommend a 3-step process for developing learning outcomes: brainstorm, draft, and be critical. They suggest using sticky notes with specific local examples or concepts from the Framework on a board to identify themes and organize the specific outcomes under them. They emphasize the importance of the reflection and editing process and encourage libraries to be inspired by the Framework without pressure to incorporate every piece of it.[6] Similarly, Megan Oakleaf lays out a "roadmap" to develop learning outcomes from the framework following the basic formula, "The student will

be able to + Active Verb."[7] This formula is a requirement of our university's Assessment Advisory Board as well. To assist with the development of active verbs, we regularly referred to the well-known Bloom's Taxonomy.

Methodology

As we undertook this yearlong project, we wanted our review and revision process to be as comprehensive as possible. We determined that our new learning outcomes should not only reflect what we were currently doing, but also be proscriptive in areas where we wanted to expand our teaching efforts. To meet these expectations, our plan rolled out in several phases: data collection, mind mapping, determination of themes, and finally synthesis and construction of new outcomes.

The first phase was data collection. We cast a wide net, querying the entire library staff with the following two questions: (1) What classes/workshops do you teach? and (2) What are the learning outcomes for those classes? We asked people to exclude one-time classes as well as learning opportunities for faculty and staff, as we were only gathering information about ongoing student learning. We did not provide training or further instruction on writing course-level learning outcomes, as we wanted to capture how our library instructors describe the outcomes for their own classes without interference.

The email was sent to everyone for two reasons: to make sure we did not unintentionally miss anyone, and for marketing and communication purposes. We wanted to ensure the entire library was aware that revising our learning outcomes was a university-wide initiative and we wanted library-wide buy-in from the beginning. We followed up with those staff who we knew were involved with instruction, including our instruction librarians who teach in first-year writing courses, our subject librarians who work with advanced and graduate level students, special collections librarians, and our information technology librarian, who was involved in designing instruction around our makerspace.

From this group, we collected course-level learning outcomes where there had been established curricula and expectations, understanding that these expectations may not have been formally described as "learning outcomes." We gathered approximately 215 individual learning outcomes from 15 unique staff members. In committee meetings, we de-identified the learning outcomes from the librarians who submitted them and removed them from the context of the class in which they were used. Many of the outcomes were identical (or almost identical) to each other, with phrasing like: "the student will be able to distinguish between popular and scholarly sources," or "the student will be able to conduct article searches in **Database X** using appropriate limiters and advanced search options." We removed these duplicate and almost-duplicate statements, gathered together outcomes with similar themes, and identified overarching ideas that ran through the individual learning goals. The committee devised categories to organize the goals with terms including: search, evaluate, and inquire. Many of these themes fit in well with the outcomes that we already had. However, some were new, and needed thought and structure to incorporate into our framework.

In order to help us categorize our new learning objectives, we looked to standards from national organizations including the Association of College and Research Libraries' **Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education**, the Society of American Archivists' **Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy**, as well as various other organizations' sample outcomes for Digital Literacy, like Media Smart's **Digital Literacy Fundamentals**, and digital literacy learning outcomes listed in our College of Computing and Digital Media programs.

After each committee member reviewed the learning outcomes as well as the professional guidelines, we separately came up with our own organizational structure and then worked together to refine our product until we were satisfied. We drafted the language of the final learning outcomes together over the course of two working meetings. By this point, we had a clear idea of what we hoped to articulate and a structure of course-level outcomes to refer to, so we were easily able to find consensus among the group. As we composed the outcomes, we repeatedly referred to Bloom's Taxonomy to ensure our outcomes were

measurable and matched the level of complexity we could aspire to, but also that we could reach in a one-shot session.

The process that began in the fall of 2017 resulted in the adoption of five new learning outcomes in the spring of 2018.

Final Product

Our work resulted in five high-level learning outcomes that apply to all areas of library instruction. We also included specific examples under each outcome to demonstrate how the course-level outcomes library staff had provided and our professional standards fit into those broader outcomes (see Appendix A). The final learning outcomes are:

- Students engaging with university library services, workshops, and events will be able to:
    – Explain the socio-political landscape of information, including who creates it, who controls it, and where to find it.
    – Articulate the value of information inquiry.
    – Develop effective search strategies for finding information.
    – Evaluate the appropriateness of information sources based on their format, structure, and purpose.
    – Compile information ethically, following the standards of a scholarly discipline.

Implementation

With outcomes that more accurately reflect what the library was both currently doing, as well as what the instruction program should prospectively be working toward, we then set out to publicize the new learning outcomes both internally and externally.

In order to promote our new outcomes externally—to faculty and administrative stakeholders outside the library—we began with a presentation for the library review board, an organization of faculty members who advise on various library-related initiatives. The presentation described how the library was part of the campus-wide initiative for revising all department-level learning outcomes as well as presenting the outcomes themselves and the assessment plan. Then, we wrote a library blog post for the faculty newsletter describing the project, reaching a larger audience beyond the library review board. We additionally added the learning outcomes to our library website with full reports for all learning outcome assessment projects that the library completed for our old learning outcomes and space to add our future assessments of the new outcomes. All of these efforts reinforced the fact that the library is actively involved with teaching students, and that teaching is an essential service provided by librarians.

Internally, we organized a workshop for library staff over the summer, requiring attendance for all instruction librarians, but also inviting any other interested staff. Committee members led guided discussions in groups of five or six for each of the learning outcomes. Questions were asked whether any of the outcomes were confusing or surprising, or if people could share moments in their own teaching where these outcomes were used. Attendees moved through the different groups, spending 15 minutes in a discussion of each of the five library learning outcomes. The goals of the workshop were to familiarize everyone with the new outcomes, and to address any fears or uncertainties around them.

While many of our final outcomes were familiar to our instruction staff, adhering to the university requirements that each of the outcomes be assessed at least once in 10 years means that all of our librarians who are involved in instruction need to be aware of the outcomes and actively thinking about ways to assess our work with each class taught. Through these sessions, both internal and external, we emphasized that we were part of a larger university-wide plan to revise our learning outcomes, just as academic departments had undertaken to revise their learning outcomes.

Next Steps

According to university guidelines, each outcome must be assessed at least once in a ten-year cycle. Oversight of this part of the project has been folded into the work of the Library Assessment and Research Committee (LARC), a standing library committee. Chaired by the assessment and marketing librarian, LARC is charged with—among other things—coordinating, advising, and assisting with library assessment and research initiatives. LARC is committed to soliciting projects from departments and librarians involved in teaching, and to assist with the data gathering and reporting out as needed. The committee includes diverse representation across the library and will ensure the annual learning outcomes assessment project is conducted by different individuals or departments each year. In addition to ensuring the work is fairly distributed among library staff, this shared responsibility will increase awareness of the ways the learning outcomes are implemented in instruction, as well as familiarity and confidence with assessment best practices.

In order to keep the new outcomes at the front of the minds of the instruction librarians, we will discuss the outcomes and assessment projects at relevant meetings and workshops. The Winter Instruction Workshop is a yearly event for the instruction librarians to come together to discuss any new trends in instruction and new technologies for the classroom experience. Putting the revised learning outcomes on the agenda for this workshop will help keep instruction librarians focused on these department-level goals.

With a project like this, it is always possible that the work will be forgotten, and that instruction—which can seem to run on autopilot during the busy times in the academic year—will continue as it has in the past. In order to ensure this does not happen, we have established systems and committees in place that can counter those trends of inertia.

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Endnotes

1. Megan Oakleaf, "A Roadmap for Assessing Student Learning Using the New Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 40, no. 5 (Sept. 2014): 512.
2. Laura Saunders, "Faculty Perspectives on Information Literacy as a Student Learning Outcome," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 38, no. 4 (July 2012): 232.
3. Laura Saunders, "Regional Accreditation Organizations' Treatment of Information Literacy: Definitions, Collaboration, and Assessment," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 33, no. 3 (May 2007): 323.
4. Donna Harp Ziegenfuss and Stephen Borrelli, "Exploring the Complexity of Student Learning Outcome Assessment Practices Across Multiple Libraries," *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* 11, no. 2 (Apr. 2016): 21.
5. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015, http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.
6. Andrea Falcone and Lyda McCartin, "Be Critical, But Be Flexible: Using the Framework to Facilitate Student Learning Outcome Development," *College & Research Libraries News* 79, no. 1 (Jan. 2018): 17–18.
7. Oakleaf, "A Roadmap," 512.

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Appendix A: DePaul University Library Learning Outcomes with Examples

Students engaging with University Library services, workshops and events will be able to:

1. **Explain the socio-political landscape of information, including who creates it, who controls it and where to find it.**

   a. Identify the unique ways libraries and repositories organize, preserve and provide access to information.

   b. Describe their responsibilities as consumers and creators of digital content.

   c. Seek guidance from experts, such as librarians (ACRL 2016)

   d. Understand that archives and special collections exist and are there to be used (SAA Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy)

   e. Understand the policies and procedures that affect access to primary sources and that these differ across repositories, databases, and collections (SAA Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy)

   f. Understand how knowledge and information is created and disseminated within a specific discipline

   g. Understand the methodology behind how data is collected

2. **Articulate the value of information inquiry.**

   a. Develop an appropriately scoped inquiry

   b. Recognize that research is an iterative process

   c. Break down complex inquiries into discrete steps/pieces

   d. Revise their inquiry based on information acquired

   e. Use background sources, prior knowledge, statistics or data, and other contextual information to explore the topic.

3. **Develop effective search strategies for finding information.**

   a. Identify key tools and research methods for information gathering within a discipline.

   b. Apply different types of searching language appropriately (keywords, controlled vocabulary, Boolean).

   c. Prioritize which information tool (e.g., databases, etc.) will be able to provide the most appropriate content in their research inquiry.

   d. Adapt their search strategy based on the information system they are using to optimize its capability.

   e. Use archival finding aids to find and locate primary sources within an archival collection (SAA Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy)

4. **Evaluate the appropriateness of information sources based on their format, structure, and purpose.**

    a. Evaluate reliability, validity, accuracy, timeliness, and point of view

    b. Differentiate between popular, scholarly, and trade publications

    c. Distinguish between primary and secondary sources

    d. Understand the importance of the chronology, creator, audience, format, and visual attributes of a primary source. (SAA Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy)

    e. Understand how authority is constructed.

    f. Understand components of citation

5. **Compile information ethically, following the standards of a scholarly discipline.**

    a. Create a narrative from multiple sources. (SAA Guidelines form Primary Source Literacy)

    b. Organize and store information from multiple sources in a deliberate way.

    c. Explain the importance of using information, including data, ethically and legally.

    d. Understand that all information is building on previous information and that they contribute to that cycle.