

## CATs in the Library? - using the 'One Minute Paper' in library instruction

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**Keywords:** *assessment, formative, librarian, CATs, instruction, information literacy*

### Introduction

*“ ... the traditional view of assessment ... involves making judgments about students’ summative achievement for purposes of selection and certification, and it also acts as a focus for institutional accountability and quality assurance...”*  
Bloxham & Boyd (2007:15)

but a set of vibrant and dynamic processes which involves the enhancement of student learning, building on their learning week by week, culminating in summative assessment is a different matter. That kind of assessment, assessment **for** learning:-

*“...is **formative** and **diagnostic**. It provides information about student achievement which allow teaching and learning activities to be changed in response to the needs of the learner and recognises the huge benefit that feedback can have on learning”* - Black & Wiliam, 1998, cited by Bloxham & Boyd (2007: p.15)

### The Librarian<sup>1</sup> and Formative Assessment

Bloxham & Boyd (2007) suggest that a variety of assessment methods have been used over time to validate the process of awarding a degree or result of an examination. It has been noted that these “traditional methods only assess a limited range of skills, and are not suitable for assessing the broader graduate attributes that programmes aim to produce” (Rust, 2002 cited in Bloxham & Boyd , 2007:164).

In the context of the LondonMet Library Service, where there is no formal assessment criteria or policy on student learning in that context, librarians tend to use assessment and feedback to judge their own delivery of information rather than finding out if a student is learning. Choinski and Emanuel (2006) emphasize this and show that librarians are at a disadvantage as they tend to have only “one shot” at

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<sup>1</sup> The job title of ‘Subject Librarian’ was changed to ‘Academic Liaison Librarian’ after this article was written. The title change was made to better reflect the important role they play in working in collaboration with academic colleagues from the faculties in the delivery of a quality learning experience for students

library instruction. Therefore they concentrate their attention on instruction. Traditional library instruction can be seen as delivery of information rather than a dialogue – a Behaviouristic approach. Librarians do use informal assessment techniques as means of judging what the students know and then if possible adjust the session to allow feedback to fill in the gaps in the users' knowledge and understanding.

The librarians' traditional role is supporting the student and outside of the formal assessment process of the university. This role is changing and developing, librarians are realising that their work in library instruction needs to be quantifiable to the departments they serve as well as to the university itself, and at some point, to current and potential students and other interested parties. Also that theories surrounding students' approaches to learning, as shown in much of the research into learning and teaching in higher education, is central to their success at university (c.f. Fry et al 2009)

Any method of assessment must demonstrate that the student has fulfilled the prerequisites of the learning outcomes or objectives and that the student has adopted or engaged in a deep approach to their learning rather than a surface approach. In a deep approach to learning students are more focused they are "relating information and ideas together and to their own experience and looking for patterns, principles and meaning in texts" the outcome displays a "higher-quality" of learning and adds meaning to their subject (Bloxham & Boyd 2007). Race (2007:68) adds an interesting twist to the discussion on deep learning versus surface learning. He states that because of the assessment process for the assignment driven undergraduate student – surface learning is **possibly** [my emphasis] 'fit for purpose'. However, by using a variety of formative assessment techniques to give students feedback on their progress could, through a process of 'feed-forward' enable them to explore the 'deeper' learning which offers them greater possibilities. Students are then in a more favourable position, able to **choose** a learning strategy (or strategies) that suits their needs.

### **Librarian assessment in practice: informal assessment techniques**

Informal assessment is the main focus of a librarian's teaching. Radcliff et al (2007) loosely defines the term informal assessment as the assessment a librarian carries out on an ad hoc basis to evaluate students' learning. Oosterhof quoted by Radcliff et al (2007: 26) states, 'Probably more than 90% of all measures of student performance involves observation and questioning...'

Informal assessment is usually unstructured and on the 'spur of the moment'. Feedback is generated in direct response to a question, expression or body language. Questions vary according to what is being taught and they are a reflection of what students are thinking or the path the instructor wishes the students to follow. One of the problems with questioning is that an answer of some sort is required and in group situations particular students may not ready to disclose their

knowledge, or lack of it, in front of their peers. A session like that can become very one-sided and not be a fair representation of the group's understanding. On the other hand in those same situations, individual students can dominate the proceedings, again leaving the session unbalanced and 'unfair' to others. One solution may be to use Blooms Taxonomy (Miller, Bradford & Cox, 1998: p.48) as a strategy for structuring the questions. This could help create a more focused engagement with them and give a solid base for assessing and achieving the informal learning outcomes associated with an instruction session. This is a solution that I have attempted, with some success, in my practice.

Radcliff et al (2007) suggest that in order to use informal assessment effectively it should be tied to the learning objectives of the library session. I would suggest taking this a step further and add that it should also be tied to learning outcomes of the programme or module in which the students are engaged. If what Boud (1988) says is true, that '... assessment methods and requirements probably have a greater influence on how and what students learn than any other single factor' then, by including informal assessments in library instruction sessions which are clearly-based on module/programme outcomes, engagement with the instruction may be that much greater than it is, ordinarily.

However here, as with all methods of assessment, if this course is followed, then librarians must be explicit in what will be taught or be the subject of instruction – the aims and learning outcomes – in the session and, most importantly, be explicit about the fact that assessment will take place and in what format it will be.

But there are alternatives...

### **Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs):**

What are CATs and why use them in library instruction? Well there is one simple reason; they 'bite-sized' or 'mini' assessments – snapshots of what learning is taking place (or not taking place) at any one time and they are taken 'on-the-fly'. They are student-focussed and they are not assessment ends in themselves, but are contributory to more inclusive forms of assessment particularly if we aspire

*'... to produce the highest possible quality of student learning ... [whose] ... central aim ... is to help students learn more effectively and efficiently than they could on their own'. Angelo & Cross (1993: 3)*

And while there is very little reported evidence of librarians using CATs as a form of assessment for library instruction they are used widely in a variety of educational settings. One particular form of CAT, the 'One Minute Paper' would seem to have considerable potential for the sessions of library instruction given the 'one-shot', and brief, nature of the sessions and the limited time available for giving/receiving feedback

Introducing CATs as an assessment method to Librarian practice could provide quantitative and qualitative evidence of students' learning while at the same time bringing the practice in line with the University's Assessment Framework feedback (2009, 7.2: 33-34). Librarians work very hard to support student learning however, if they are to support it even more effectively by involving themselves in assessment activities, they require an activity that is both objective and flexible enough to use with any group of students -undergraduate or postgraduate. The activity must be simple, quick and easy to use so that it can not only be administered but also processed and feedback given all within the limited time allotted to them. The 'One-Minute Paper' seems ideal for this. It is a method already recommended by the university for formative assessment activities and it is also a technique that complements the Information Literacy policy, currently being developed by LondonMet Library Services.

In line with the discussions above, 'One-MinutePaper' activities were introduced into the author's practice, at first with limited success. However, having returned to the original work by Angelo & Cross (1993) and using their precise formulation, it has become clear that the key to success in using the One Minute Paper with students in this context is a declaration to them that an assessment process has been built into their library session. This is allied to a description and explanation of the learning outcomes envisaged and an explanation of the form the assessment will take, i.e. that at a point (or points) during the session they will be asked to respond to one or two questions about the session, that they will be asked to respond in writing on (e.g.) a single 'Post-It' note. They should also be told that their responses will be processed, there and then, at the session and also that this is 'feedback for them – not for the library'. It is that openness - about the part assessment plays in the library instruction – that has brought new interest and validity to the sessions where this CAT has been used. Students know what they are about to be shown, they are given opportunities to demonstrate the learning outcomes in the session and most importantly the library instruction has meaning and is put into context - links into (where possible) their programme of study. Even more crucial is the fact that they are receiving feedback about their academic performance on specific aspects of their module/course and how they might improve that performance

### **Implications for practice**

Angelo & Cross (ibid. p.28) suggest that when starting out with CATs – and there are 50 CATS described in their work - you should first use them in sessions with students that '...you know well and are comfortable with ... one in which most students are succeeding and are relatively satisfied'. This is a particularly difficult issue for librarians as we never know what any cohort will be like until they appear for a session. Therefore a decision was made to trial one CAT at a time – in this case the One Minute Paper - until comfort with its use was achieved.

A complaint made, about using the One Minute Paper frequently, is the amount of paper used and there are alternatives to a paper-based approach (e.g. using Web-

based approaches or mobile 'phone technology such as 'Txttools' – [www.txttools.co.uk](http://www.txttools.co.uk)). However, I feel it is best practice to retain (for the moment) the low tech and simplicity of the paper-base as it is non-threatening and anonymous. It is quick and easy to use especially when there are no computers present in the session/class. It is, of course, possible to ask students to answer the questions at a later stage and give them feedback – both processes online - but this loses the impact of immediacy. It has been observed that stating that feedback will be given at the session, displays to the students that their questions will be dealt with and they are more motivated to take part.

The downside of using a CAT is that it cannot show how students may be transferring learning gained in their library instruction into their academic work (Radcliff et al, op. cit.). This can only be judged from comments and feedback from the lecturers 'at the receiving end' and the students themselves and so, a formal evaluation of the use of CATs in this context is now needed.

### **Conclusion: the future of CATs in the library**

Formative assessment in the library, in the form of CATs may be a way forward for librarians who want to strengthen the assessment process they already perform and further highlight their commitment to the enhancement of student learning in the 'one shot' library instruction sessions. They represent a form of 'two-way feedback' (London Metropolitan University, 2009) which gives validity and context to their library instruction sessions particularly when these are provided as a response to an upcoming assignment.

The One Minute Paper has become an integral part my practice. Because of that, I now have a record of students' learning and I am able to "feedforward" to students – giving them information that can be used in individual learning and assignments and, right across their programme or course.

Finally, comments from the recent use of CATs in library instruction – still anecdotal until an evaluation is performed - indicate that students really appreciate the kinds of assessment on offer and tutors comment that their students are focused, engaged and 'buzzing'.

Time constraints are and will continue to be an issue and so it is not always possible to give feedback at the end of the instruction. Currently my feedback is given at the end of the class (when possible), through WebLearn, email and a social networking page, Facebook. The latter allows group discussion of issues raised as a result of library instruction and from the responses I am getting, students appreciate the innovation of the One Minute Paper which still run alongside the more traditional informal assessment techniques.

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## Biographical Note

**Denise Adams** has been the Academic Liaison Librarian at London Metropolitan University for over 20 years. Her specialist subjects are Education and Caribbean Studies within the Humanities, Arts, Languages and Education Faculty.

Throughout her career her main focus has been on delivering library skills and research sessions to students. Her current focus is on developing an Information Literacy course to improve the student experience and engagement in accessing, evaluating and using library resources.