



Beyond Numbers: Advancing Human-Centered Library Assessment Through Qualitative Understanding

Feng-Ru Sheu

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Beyond Numbers: Advancing Human-Centered Library Assessment Through Qualitative Understanding

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ABSTRACT

Assessment is a fundamental practice across professional domains, providing the basis for understanding effectiveness, identifying areas for improvement, and guiding evidence-based decision-making. Within libraries, assessment is often dominated by quantitative measures such as surveys and usage statistics, which, while valuable, offer only a partial view of user experience. This paper advocates for a shift toward qualitative approaches that capture the deeper, human dimensions of library engagement—emotions, belonging, confidence, and meaning. Drawing on current literature and recent case studies from academic libraries, this article demonstrates that qualitative assessment, though sometimes perceived as time- and labor-intensive, can be feasibly integrated into existing workflows, even with limited resources. Methods such as interviews, reflections, observations, and artifact analyses yield richer insights into how library services influence learning and community. By emphasizing understanding over measurement, qualitative assessment fosters empathy, inclusion, and continuous improvement. Ultimately, this human-centered approach repositions assessment as a process of learning rather than evaluation, aligning evidence with the lived experiences of library users.

Keywords: qualitative methods; library assessment; human-centered design; mixed methods

INTRODUCTION

Assessment is an essential practice across all professional domains. Whether in education, healthcare, design, or librarianship, assessment provides the foundation for understanding strengths, identifying areas for improvement, and making informed, evidence-based decisions. It serves as a critical mechanism for reflection, accountability, and continuous growth. Although assessment has often been associated with quantitative measures or formal research projects, it is, in fact, a universal professional responsibility that extends far beyond data collection. Meaningful assessment relies on understanding, not merely measuring—and qualitative methods are often the most effective means of achieving that understanding.

The ultimate purpose of assessment is not to judge or rank, but to learn. Qualitative assessment captures experiences, perceptions, and meanings—dimensions that numerical data alone cannot fully reveal. Within libraries and educational environments, qualitative approaches shed light on how users engage with resources, why learners encounter challenges, and what contextual factors influence their experiences. These insights are essential for reflective practice, service enhancement, and informed decision-making. When embraced as an ongoing, inquiry-driven process, assessment transforms feedback into insight and experience into knowledge.

Qualitative methods, in particular, invite reflection, dialogue, and narrative, enabling practitioners to connect evidence to authentic human experiences. They also align naturally with professional values such as empathy, inclusion, and continuous learning—values central to both librarianship and education.

Despite its recognized importance, assessment often faces significant barriers in practice. Limited time, staffing, and budgets frequently constrain what librarians and instructional designers can accomplish. Many academic libraries lack dedicated assessment personnel or formal infrastructure to support systematic evaluation (Association of College and Research Libraries [ACRL], 2023), making large-scale studies impractical. Nevertheless, as the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois [CARLI] (2025) emphasizes, meaningful assessment does not need to be resource-intensive. When integrated into existing workflows, even small-scale, sustainable efforts can yield valuable evidence for improvement. Qualitative methods are especially advantageous under such conditions because they are adaptable, low-cost, and scalable (Kohler, 2024; Lim, 2025). A brief reflective discussion, short interview, or a set of open-ended survey questions can generate deep, contextually rich insights without requiring substantial resources.

Although qualitative approaches often require more time and effort than standardized quantitative assessments, they remain both feasible and worthwhile. With thoughtful design and clear focus, even small-scale qualitative studies can be implemented efficiently within existing library operations. More importantly, they yield deeper, more nuanced insights into user experiences—insights that numerical measures alone cannot capture. Given that library services are inherently human-centered, qualitative assessment holds particular value. It allows practitioners to explore users' emotions, sense of belonging, and personal connections to library spaces and services. These dimensions of experience—rooted in feelings, meaning, and relationships—are difficult, if not impossible, to quantify. Yet they are essential to understanding the true impact of library engagement and to designing services that foster inclusion, empathy, and trust.

In this article, the author presents key qualitative methods, practical approaches for integrating assessment into everyday workflows, illustrative case studies, and broader professional considerations—together offering a foundation for more meaningful, human-centered assessment in libraries.

PRACTICAL APPROACHES AND METHODS

There are many methods or tools that librarians can choose for their particular purpose or inquiry. Each tool for data collection or analysis allows us to gain a better understanding or obtain more profound insights into a particular project or service. Even under resource constraints, libraries can employ multiple assessment methods that are adaptable, scalable, and cost-effective. These include informal feedback mechanisms, observation and reflection, content and usage analysis, interviews and focus groups, as well as document or artifact review. Below are some feasible example approaches, along with a brief explanation of their practical applications.

- **Informal Feedback and Reflection.** One of the simplest forms of qualitative assessment involves brief reflection prompts. In library instruction, for example, students might answer, “What is one thing you learned today?” or “What remains unclear?” These minute reflections reveal patterns in understanding and misconception, providing

immediate feedback to instructors (Pausch & Popp, 2006). Similarly, librarians can use digital polls, QR-coded slips, or feedback boards in public spaces to collect qualitative impressions of programs or resources.

- **Observation and Interaction Analysis.** Observation provides another rich, qualitative lens. Watching how students navigate a database, collaborate on group projects, or interact in workshops can illuminate learning processes and barriers. Documenting these observations and discussing them in post-session reflections helps staff identify instructional gaps and design more user-centered interventions. This can also apply to outreach events, such as observing the interactions and or patterns of behaviors during the event.
- **Interviews and Focus Groups.** When time permits, short interviews or focus groups with students, faculty, or staff can offer powerful contextual understanding. Even a 10-minute conversation can uncover the reasoning behind user behaviors or attitudes—insights that numbers rarely provide. Such methods foster collaboration and inclusivity (Kitzinger, 1995), especially when paired with critical assessment frameworks that emphasize equity and representation.
- **Document and Artifact Review.** Qualitative assessment can also rely on existing artifacts such as student assignments, reference chat transcripts, or online discussion posts. Reviewing and coding these materials can reveal trends in learning, information-literacy development, or service needs without requiring new data collection.

Mixed-Methods Integration

It is always encouraged to utilize multiple approaches for assessment. It allows librarians to investigate a question or a phenomenon from multiple angles. Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches—such as pairing open-ended reflections with brief numerical surveys—enhances reliability and depth. As researchers proposed, triangulating data from multiple sources strengthens validity and yields a more complete understanding of user experiences (Jick, 1979; Patton, 1999). Quantitative data answers questions like ‘How many?’ or ‘How often?’ Qualitative data asks ‘Why?’ ‘How?’ and ‘What does this mean?’ It is about context, emotion, and perspective—the things numbers cannot fully explain.

In research, thoroughly understanding a topic often requires examining it from multiple perspectives—similar to viewing a sculpture from different angles to appreciate its depth and texture. Researchers refer to this as *triangulation*, which involves combining various types of evidence to form a more complete picture (Breitmayer et al. 1993; Patton, 1999). In library assessment, for example, triangulation might include using surveys to gauge satisfaction, conducting interviews to explore user experiences, and observing actual behaviors. When these different viewpoints are combined, they provide a more credible and comprehensive understanding of a library’s impact. This approach is not about repeating the same information; it’s about integrating multiple perspectives to gain a deeper understanding of experiences beyond simply counting interactions.

Encouraging Broader Assessment Methods: Beyond Surveys

In many library contexts, assessment projects rely heavily on surveys as their primary data collection method. Surveys are valuable because they provide measurable and comparable results that inform strategic planning and accountability. However, an overreliance on surveys risks narrowing our understanding of complex human experiences. Quantitative data can tell us what

users do or how often they engage, but it rarely reveals why they behave in a certain way or how they feel about their experiences.

To gain deeper and more holistic insights, librarians should incorporate qualitative methods that capture meaning, emotion, and context. Techniques such as interviews, focus groups, observations, narrative reflections, and artifact analyses help uncover dimensions of user experience that numbers cannot fully express. These approaches reveal users' feelings of belonging, confidence, curiosity, or frustration—all crucial to understanding engagement and impact.

For instance, qualitative feedback from students might show that a new library space makes them feel “welcomed and supported,” even if quantitative data records only a modest rise in visits. Similarly, open-ended interviews might uncover how students experience anxiety or empowerment during the research process—insights that guide more empathetic instructional design and service delivery.

As Hodges and Meiman (2021) note in their discussion of critical assessment, library evaluation must move beyond counting usage to understanding context, power, and voice. Qualitative approaches, particularly when integrated with quantitative evidence, provide this richer understanding. They allow assessment to be not merely a measure of success but a process of listening, empathy, and continuous learning.

In short, numbers tell part of the story; narratives complete it. By embracing diverse assessment methods—especially qualitative inquiry—libraries can uncover the emotional and social dimensions of user experience and strengthen their capacity for inclusive, evidence-based improvement.

Recent Case Studies Demonstrating Qualitative Insight

Several recent studies exemplify how libraries have used qualitative or mixed-methods approaches to assess impact under limited resources.

At the University of Michigan's Taubman Health Sciences Library, Shannon et al. (2024) conducted a sequential mixed-methods assessment of the impact of the library and informationist on patient and population care, beginning with qualitative interviews of health sciences faculty and clinicians, followed by a large-scale survey. The interviews revealed three main themes: access to information resources, the role and importance of informationists, and information-seeking behaviors. These insights guided the creation of the quantitative survey. Qualitative feedback from staff and faculty provided crucial context for interpreting the quantitative survey results. It revealed how library services contributed to professional growth, teaching, and making informed decisions. Additionally, it showed shifts in perceptions of resource accessibility and expert support during a crisis-driven, remote setting.

At Emporia State University, Kane and Mosakowski (2024) used post-COVID space studies involving focus groups, whiteboard prompts, and user observations. These qualitative data complemented usage statistics, allowing the team to understand not just how often spaces were used but why students returned—or did not—after renovations.

At Mount Royal University Library, Vanderwerff and Herscovitch (2020) studied how moving the curriculum collection to a new, co-located building with classrooms affected student perceptions. They used qualitative survey questions alongside physical circulation data. Students' responses supported the circulation findings and showed that proximity and convenience were key

factors in collection use for assignments and practicum work. This shift significantly raised student awareness and increased use of the collection.

Together, these studies demonstrate how qualitative evidence—derived from dialogue, reflection, and contextual observation—enables libraries to assess user experiences and outcomes even under significant resource constraints.

TOWARD A CULTURE OF REFLECTIVE QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT

When we rely solely on numbers, we risk missing the human story behind the data. Quantitative assessment tells us what happened—such as attendance, usage, or satisfaction scores—but qualitative research helps us understand why it happened, how it was experienced, and what it meant to the people involved. In libraries, this difference matters. We do not just offer services; we create experiences. We help users learn, connect, and feel supported. These are powerful outcomes—but they're hard to measure with simple metrics.

The movement toward critical and qualitative assessment reflects a growing recognition that numbers alone cannot define success. As Hodges and Meiman (2021) argue, critical assessment encourages professionals to consider equity, voice, and power dynamics in the gathering and interpretation of evidence. Qualitative inquiry aligns closely with these values, amplifying user perspectives that are often overlooked in standardized metrics.

Moreover, qualitative assessment nurtures a reflective professional culture. Team debriefs, post-project reflections, and narrative reporting foster dialogue and shared learning among colleagues. As the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI, 2025) notes, even small, cyclical assessments can yield valuable longitudinal understanding when conducted consistently.

Ultimately, qualitative assessment supports a human-centered approach to library and educational practice. It recognizes that meaningful evidence is not confined to numerical data, but is also found in stories, interactions, and lived experiences.

CONCLUSION

Assessment is not the exclusive domain of researchers; it is a universal professional practice that supports evidence-based improvement, reflection, and learning. While quantitative surveys remain valuable, the future of library assessment depends on our willingness to look beyond numbers. Qualitative methods offer accessible, flexible, and insightful approaches. They allow practitioners to uncover the why and how behind user behavior, enrich understanding, and guide meaningful change. As the assessment literature increasingly demonstrates, practical evaluation is less about resources and more about mindset: a sustained commitment to curiosity, empathy, and continuous improvement.

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Dr. Feng-Ru Sheu is a Professor and Instructional Design Librarian at Kent State University with formal training in library science, information science, special education, and instructional technology. Her work focuses on research, development, and evaluation in instructional design, aiming to enhance student learning and user experience through evidence-based practices and emerging technologies. She uses a variety of approaches—including needs assessment, task analysis, usability testing, and qualitative inquiry—to support data-driven decision-making. Before joining Kent State, she worked as an instructional designer and eLearning specialist in higher education, the pharmaceutical industry, nonprofit child welfare, and sports coaching, bringing valuable cross-sector insights to her work.