Assessment is a big deal in everything these days. We’re assessing user needs, usability data, the environment, even community needs. No academic library can dodge the assessment bullet for long and expect to stay accredited. And our library instruction sessions are at the top of that list. I tried the simple three questions on the notecard approach to assessment—What did you learn? What are you still unclear about? Anything further?—which worked well, but was a lot to review, compile, and transcribe.

Then there are the online quizzes or polls that are very popular today. Through Google Forms or Poll Everywhere students can respond to the same questions and the results are compiled and organized online. This results in less work and no lingering notecards on the desk. I like all of these approaches. However, there is one huge thing that has always bothered me about most assessment practices. Even with the “right” assessment tool, changes that I make to my instruction sessions will only affect the next class in the next semester. So, despite the few occasions when a student might e-mail me for help, or the rare occasion when a student might make an appointment for a private consultation (or the even rarer occasion when a faculty member schedules us for multiple sessions), it is almost always too late for the students giving the feedback to benefit from the changes. I knew there had to be a more efficient way I could assess how students were doing and respond to their needs before they disappeared out of that classroom door.

Discovering how others use Google Docs

I stumbled upon the answer quite by accident. A couple of colleagues were meeting on how they use Google Docs in their classrooms. Since I managed through library school with only a netbook and no Microsoft Office software, I had become fairly familiar with using Google Docs to write papers or create presentations, but I was unfamiliar with instruction applications.

One colleague explained that she asked students to work in groups and fill out a Word document with three or four pre-filled questions to assess learning. Another uses the Google Docs “Form” as a sort of exit-ticket from her class. She posts a link, and they fill out the quick assessment survey before leaving class along with their e-mail addresses. Since talking to her, I’ve become aware of a number of other librarians that use this same format. I also discovered that there are more and more ways academics are using Google Docs in their classrooms.

These librarians are capitalizing on one of the unique features of Google Docs; real-time multiple users. Unlike some online questionnaires, Google Docs allows up to 50 multiple users to access one document at the same time. My colleagues also explained that facilitators can see the results instantly, and

Shannon R. Simpson is research instruction and special collections librarian at Towson University, e-mail: ssimpson@towson.edu

© 2012 Shannon R. Simpson
collaborators can watch changes others are making. I was intrigued.

I thought the Word-format evaluation tool had great potential. I liked the idea of having the students answer questions as they go along in the session—a lot of us do that with work-sheets. The difference with Google Docs, is that the facilitator can see the student's responses. Instead of needing to turn anything in at the end of class, all of the work is completed and available for the instructor by the close of class. I also liked my colleague's exit ticket idea, in that students could provide further questions and the librarian could respond via e-mail. However, I still felt like there was a missed opportunity in the classroom. I wanted to see each and every step that I model in the research process, replicated by the students in my classroom while they were doing it. I didn’t want to have to ask them for responses or politely wait until the end of class in order to see where they may have been stumped.

Creating and using Google Spreadsheets

When my wheels got turning, I decided I wanted to use the Google Spreadsheets format. It’s a pared down version of the capabilities of an Excel spreadsheet, but all I needed. I decided that students would have to fill out an assigned row with information they find from the tasks listed at the top of each column. What I found was a great way to watch the students work process the information I was dishing in real time. This allowed me to not only watch the process, but also to correct or make suggestions in the moment, as well.

![Sample spreadsheet from an instruction session. Visit this article online for more detailed image.](image)

Basically, I model a searching behavior and then I have a corresponding task listed on the top of a column on the spreadsheet. Using their given research topic, the students replicate the behavior and enter the found information in a corresponding cell. We start with easy tasks and get more complicated towards the end of the session. Most of the tasks are based on the learning outcomes I’ve listed for the class.

I start with simple requests, like asking them for their research topic, then I’ll begin the session by giving them an overview of materials and showing them some general reference items. I then will have them choose a reference item from the resources I’ve introduced and explain why they feel it
will help them with their topic. For example, row 1/column A might say, “Research Topic,” row 1/column B might say, “Reference Item,” row 1/column C will say, “Why?” and on and on.

**Why it works**
There are so many reasons, a lot I didn’t foresee, as to why this is great for the classroom. First of all, the students have to pay attention the whole session in order to stay on task. Since they can see each other working on the spreadsheet (though you can arrange things to be anonymous), they don’t want to look like they don’t understand in front of their peers, so they really pay attention. I realize that this could be a double-edged sword, as some students may feel anxiety to perform in front of their peers, but I have yet to see this as a hindrance for any student completing the spreadsheet.

Second, the items on the spreadsheet directly correspond with learning outcomes for the instruction session along with the tasks they need to complete for their assignments. Since they are actually completing work that they will eventually turn in for a paper or assignment they have enough personally invested to pay attention and work through.

Third, the students can access the URL for the document again after class. If they’ve forgotten the name of the book, or the citation for the article, all they need to do is return to the spreadsheet. There is a “share” option in all of the Google Docs formats. It not only allows multiple users to edit the document, but provides a URL in order to do so. (I always customize and shorten the URL at tinyurl.com.)

Fourth, the professors love it. They remark every time I’ve used it in class about how impressed they are. They track the spreadsheet and watch what the students do as we go through class. Some of them even offer suggestions based on what they see students enter on the spreadsheet. They really appreciate the functionality of being able to watch everything in real time. In fact, the occasional professor that can’t make it to class is always effusive when I send them the link to the document and they can see what the students completed in class. It’s a great way to show value.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, now that I’ve gotten the hang of the sometimes high-level of multitasking required (especially if you have a PowerPoint in addition to showing pages and tasks on your library Web site), I can watch the student results and re-direct or re-explain when it’s clear that multiple students are not understanding a concept, or I’ve simply missed an important point.

**Challenges**
While there are challenges to conducting an instruction session in this manner, it also has a great deal of potential. One of the biggest challenges is that it does take getting used to with all of the multitasking required. I’m usually toggling between the library Web page and the online course guide, while showing a PowerPoint and watching the Google spreadsheet to make sure everyone is on task. This was overwhelming the first time I tried. It takes a few sessions in order to feel comfortable. A colleague that is excited but hesitant to try the spreadsheet in her class came up with a wonderful solution. She’s enlisting the help of the class’ professor. She’s explained how the spreadsheet works and asked the professor to keep a close eye on the content the students are entering so that there are two sets of eyes watching the students work and guiding them through the session.

Another challenge is with students that may be technology challenged. While I’ve only had a couple of students that found using the Google spreadsheet an overwhelming and new concept, it still requires mentioning. Since I’ve found this to be an occasional case with nontraditional or returning students, I want to come up with a way to help them. Many may already feel subconscious regarding their age and lack

(continues on page 549)
needs of disabled students and develop collections and services to meet these needs;  
• purchasing audiobooks, closed captioned video materials, and other alternative media and technology to supplement traditional library collections; and  
• additional training for reference staff in assisting with library research and instruction to those students with learning disabilities.

These three groups form only a small segment of the diverse groups of students at a college or university campus in the 21st century. As academic libraries seek to meet diversity goals, we must look beyond the “traditional” facets of diversity and strive to meet the needs of a diversifying population. It is only through this process of “diversifying diversity” will we truly meet the needs of all students.

Notes
2. Ibid., 2.

Conclusion
If you are at all like me and also had that same nagging feeling that you could help students more if you could only see and assess what they were doing while in your classroom, then I recommend jumping right into using the spreadsheet.

With so much transparency you will have a hard time returning to previous forms of assessment. I created a sort of Best Practice how-to list in nothing less than a Google Docs.2 It explains in lay terms how to create one of these for the first time, regardless of experience with Google Docs in the past. Good luck!

Notes
2. You can access the “10 Steps to Creating a Google Docs Spreadsheet for Real Time Assessment” at http://tinyurl.com/RealTimeSpreadsheet. Please pay close attention to all of item number 6 when creating one for the first time.