



Article

Utilizing Google Docs as an Assessment Tool for Academic Reference Librarians

Jim Frutchey
Marywood University

Abstract

Gathering patron feedback is necessary for all reference librarians who wish to understand their strengths and weaknesses as viewed through the eyes of those they assist. Such feedback is especially important for individuals seeking tenure or advancement in places of higher education as it provides evidence of institutional value. However, it can be a daunting task to create an effective means of performance assessment that is easily distributed and palatable to patrons. This paper describes the use of Google Docs to establish an effective method of gathering feedback with a modicum of computer skills.

Feedback provides a measurement of the level of success that a reference librarian is having when working with patrons. A word of thanks certainly may brighten the day of a librarian who is working diligently to meet the informational needs of library users. More in-depth feedback from patrons regarding reference interactions, however, is a necessary tool for professionals striving for consistent growth and improvement of their job skills. For librarians seeking promotion, an assessment of instructional effectiveness and customer satisfaction is often a requirement in a portfolio.

As the first faculty librarian who is required to submit an application for rank and tenure at my university, feedback regarding reference and information literacy sessions is of critical importance for my hopes of advancement. It will serve in a similar fashion to the feedback classroom faculty members receive from their students through the faculty evaluation forms that are distributed in classes at the close of each semester. A recently hired reference librarian at my institution has asked to borrow my method of soliciting patron feedback as she begins to progress through the tenure track. I am confident that it will aid both of our causes.

I have found an effective method of obtaining valuable assessment data with a minimum of pressure on patrons through the use of Google Docs. Simple or complex, short or long, the creation of electronic questionnaires to gather anonymous work-related feedback requires only rudimentary computer knowledge. The days of asking patrons to complete paper surveys only to receive a dozen in return during a good semester are in the past. During the first semester of implementing a feedback form through Google Docs, I received and instantly organized and tabulated 60 quality responses for inclusion in my portfolio.

The details involved in creating a feedback tool through Google Docs may evolve over time, but the features available and the ease of use backed by the incredibly well-established Google name make its utilization a relatively safe bet for the present and future. At the time of writing, the following method of creating a performance assessment tool is correct: After establishing a free Google account and logging in to Google Docs, a 'Create' drop-down box appears, and 'Form' may be chosen. The ability to choose an attractive background theme from dozens of examples then presents itself. Among the choices are two that seem to be most appropriately suited for librarians. They are entitled 'Books Classic' and 'Books Modern.' Following the selection of a background theme, the form may be given a title and description. For example, I chose to give my attempt to gather feedback the short and memorable title 'Rate Librarian Jim.' The introductory explanation to the form reads:

I am seeking your feedback regarding my work at Marywood University. If I have assisted you, I would greatly appreciate it if you would take a minute to thoughtfully fill out this form. You are encouraged to complete this form for each interaction that we have had. Your responses are gathered anonymously. Thank you, Jim Frutchey

For the next step, the assessment questions for the patrons may be created in the desired format, and the format is easily changed from question to question. The 'Add Item' drop-down box provides options for seven types of questions. All of the choices offer space for a title and explanatory text. A 'Text' question makes a small text box appear to patrons. The 'Paragraph Text' option presents a large text box for in-depth responses. If 'Multiple Choice' is selected, text boxes open to the questionnaire creator so that each choice may be appropriately described. An optional 'Add Other' button is included for multiple choice responses that fall outside of the choices provided and that may need further clarification in a small text box. Respondents may only click on one of

the choices for each 'Multiple Choice' item. Similar to 'Multiple Choice' is the 'Checkboxes' option. With a 'Checkboxes' question, more than one response may be selected. A 'Choose from a List' question allows labeling in text boxes for as many possible responses as desired. The patron is required to choose one selection from a dropdown box for this type of item. Next in line is the 'Scale' option. The meaning of the 1 and 5 ends of the spectrum may be detailed by the developer of the questionnaire in two text boxes, and, appropriately, a rating from 1 to 5 is the result of this type of question. The final potential question type is a 'Grid.' With this option, the creator may choose the number of necessary columns and rows. Each column and row allows for explanatory notes. The respondent provides his or her opinion by selecting one response per row. The process of creating a questionnaire is direct and uncomplicated. In spite of its simplicity, a librarian is given ample latitude for creating an assessment tool that meets individual informational needs.

In an attempt to make the questionnaire quick and easy for the patrons while providing useful information for me, the following six inquiries are posed in my assessment tool:

1. Marywood University Affiliation – I am a(n)
 - undergraduate student
 - graduate student
 - faculty member
 - administration or staff member
 - other
2. Type of Inquiry – Jim attempted to assist me (check all appropriate responses)
 - with choosing a topic for a research project
 - with finding research material
 - by proofreading/editing a paper
 - by answering a simple directional question (e.g., where are the paper periodicals)
 - by visiting my class to discuss library resources
 - other
3. Area of Inquiry – The topic of my work with Jim was (e.g., history, business, psychology, etc.) ...
4. Quality of Assistance – I would rate Jim's help as...
Rating scale: 1 (outstanding) to 5 (less than adequate)
5. Future Help from Jim – I would ask Jim for assistance in the future.
Rating scale: 1 (absolutely yes) to 5 (absolutely not)
6. Comments – Praise and/or constructive criticism is welcome here.

Once the assessment tool is created and saved, a URL is automatically generated and uploaded to the Internet. Establishing a unique title that can be easily remembered and retrieved in a basic search engine query is certainly a plus. As mentioned earlier, I chose 'Rate Librarian Jim' as the title of my questionnaire (see Figure 1). Many of the academic reference librarians I have known maintain their own Web pages where material such as contact information, an explanation of professional responsibilities, links to

favorite reference resources, and information literacy assistance is made readily available. For librarians who may not feel that they have the time or skills to create a personal web page, as with the creation of questionnaires, Google offers simple-to-use creation tools. An explanation of and a link to the questionnaire are easily incorporated into the Web page of a librarian. With a couple of additional mouse clicks, a link to the feedback form may be included in the email signature of a librarian which is sent out in all outgoing messages.

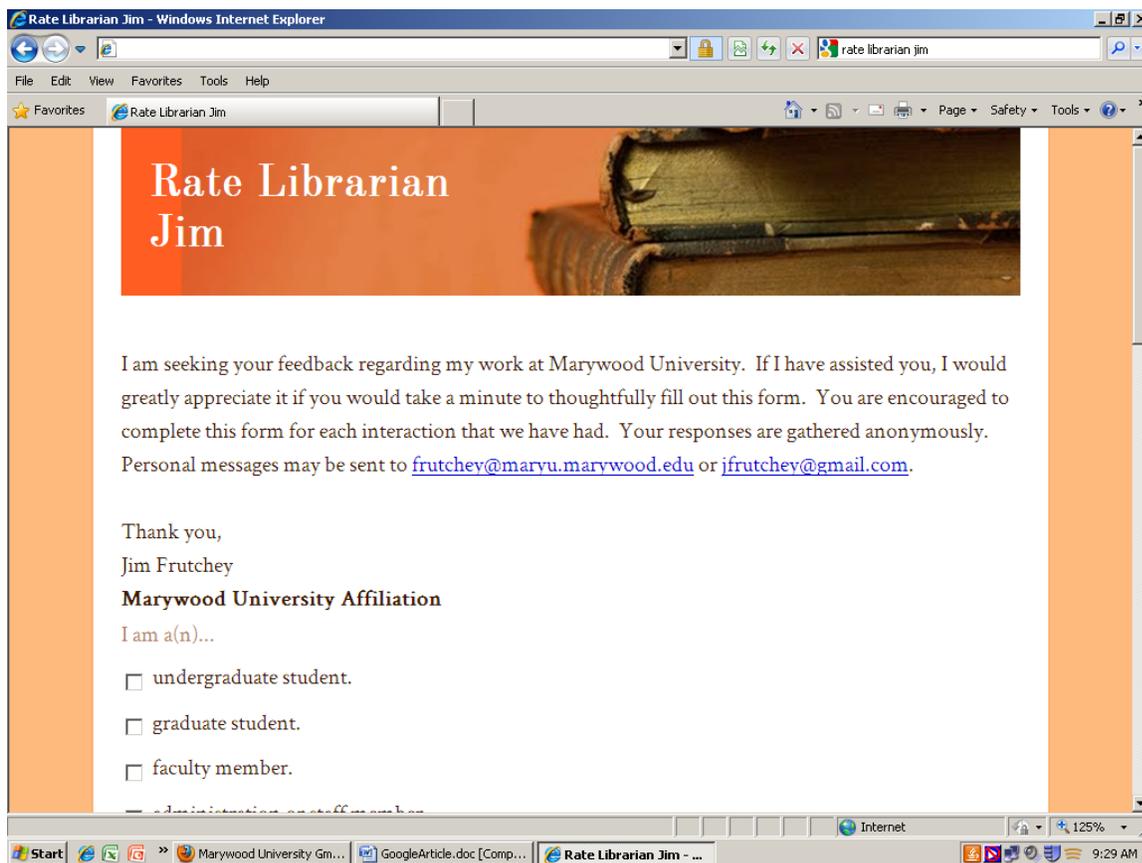


Figure 1. Patron interface for 'Rate Librarian Jim' assessment tool.

With all of the background work completed, the next step to obtaining feedback is promotion. If library patrons are not made aware of the questionnaire, the time and effort spent devising it will be for naught. One method of advertisement is the occasional blanket email message. Within institutions of higher education, it often only takes one email to reach the student body or the entire faculty. When sending such blanket email messages, it behooves the librarian to clearly and succinctly explain the importance of gathering assessment data, to ask for feedback concerning both past and future interactions, to assure the anonymity of the respondents, to stress the ease of completing the form, and to offer thanks to those willing to provide their opinions. This type of message can be sent once a semester in order to avoid the possibility of being labeled as annoying. If the link to the assessment form is prominently displayed in the librarian's email

signature, every electronic correspondence becomes an advertisement to solicit feedback.

It is also possible to effectively promote assessment via face-to-face encounters with patrons. When meeting with classes for information literacy sessions, links to the feedback form may be included in both electronic and print class handouts. A brief explanation concerning access to the form need only take a minute, and depending on its uniqueness, students can be told to simply Google the title of the form. As with group encounters, a librarian can smoothly and quickly ask for feedback during individual reference sessions without putting the patron on the spot.

As the feedback accumulates in Google Docs, it is automatically tabulated and inserted into an Excel-like database that is only accessible by the librarian (see Figure 2). Each response has its own row in the database. The columns of the spreadsheet include one for date and time and one for the responses to each of the questions or statements posed to patrons. In order to access the spreadsheet, the librarian must log-in to Google, click on 'Documents,' and click on the name of the form. Select information

The screenshot shows a Google Docs spreadsheet with the following data:

	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	Marywood University Affiliation	Type of Inquiry	Area of Inquiry	Quality of Assistance	Future Help from Jim	Comments
24	faculty member.	by visiting my class to discuss library resources.	social work	1	1	Thanks Jim for coming to my social work class and providing information for the Saturday graduate students!
25	graduate student.	with finding research material., by visiting my class to discuss library resources.	art history	1	1	I thought Jim was very helpful and easy to approach and work with. I always have a good experience working with him.
26	undergraduate student.	with finding research material., by answering a simple directional question (for example, where are the paper periodicals).	History	1	1	Jim, your good at the job you do. Thank you very much for being there for us to learn, and for everybody to get help.
27	undergraduate student.	with finding research material.	english	1	1	Jim knows his way around the library and was able to answer all of my questions.

Figure 2. Examples of tabulated feedback from assessment form of author.

may then be used to create a visually appealing chart to display the accumulation of patron feedback. For people accustomed to creating charts with Excel, this function should be easy to manipulate. For others, a bit of hit-and-miss practice may be required. To begin to create a chart, it is necessary to log in to one's Google account, to click on "Documents", and to choose the appropriate form. With the feedback spreadsheet open, the next step is to either click on "Insert" near the top of the page and then choose "Chart" or click on the "Insert Chart" icon. The data range to be used then needs to be entered into the chart editor, and the type of chart chosen. Styles include line, bar, scatter, and pie charts. The chart can then be named and a color-scheme devised. Finally, the chart is inserted into the spreadsheet and a tab in the upper-left corner of the chart allows for it to be edited, deleted, saved elsewhere, published on the Internet, copied, or moved to its own sheet within the database (see Figure 3).

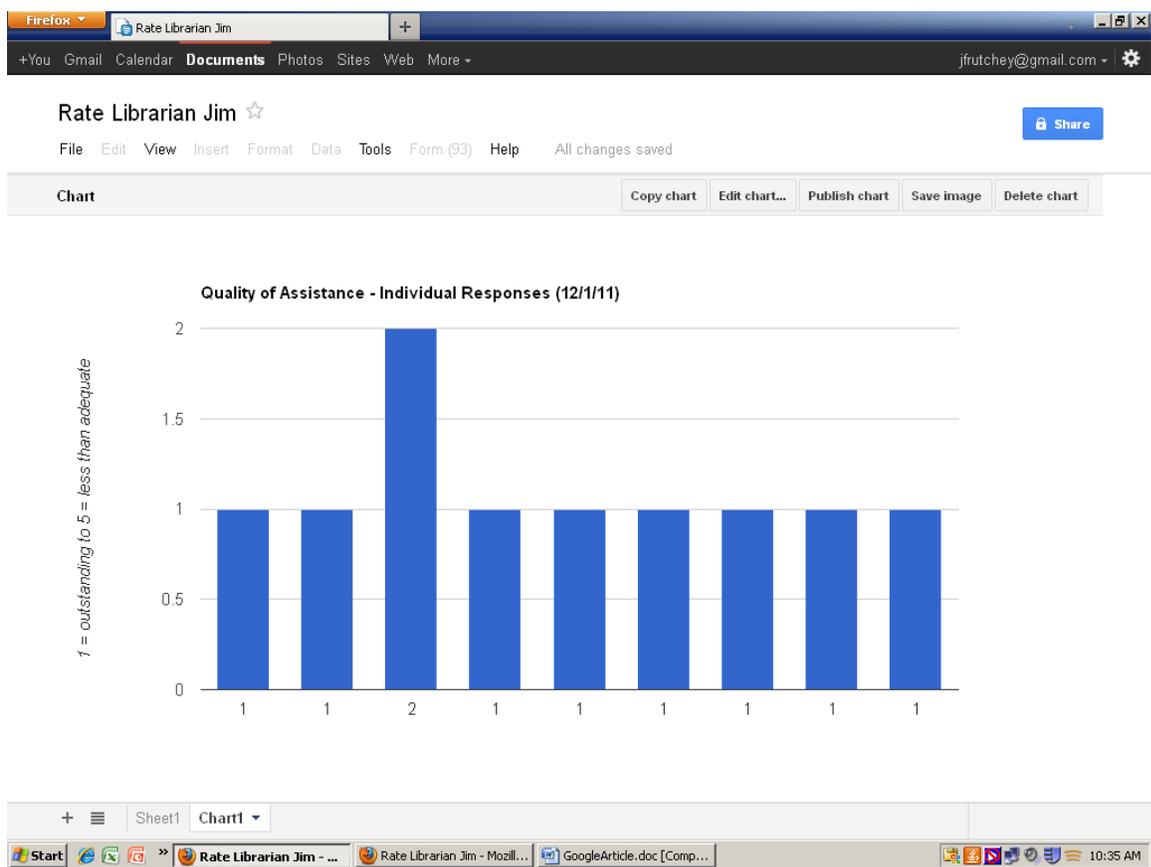


Figure 3. Column chart displaying feedback regarding the quality of assistance received.

Accumulating and learning from the constructive feedback of patrons is important for any reference librarian. For those seeking tenure and advancement in an institution of higher education, this type of assessment is especially vital in order to understand areas that might be improved upon and to clearly demonstrate professional value. The ability to easily create, disseminate, and gather the results of an individualized assessment

form with Google Docs has the potential to be a powerful tool for librarians. This has thankfully been the case with me as the feedback I have received has been both constructive and plentiful.

Jim Frutchey is currently serving the dual role of acting library director and collection development librarian at Marywood University in Scranton, Pennsylvania. From 2007 to 2011 Jim was a reference librarian at Marywood.

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