

Student-Learning Assessment Report PS 410

by

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With the Assistance of

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“The most important thing about assessment is that it promotes dialogue among faculty.” R.L. Miller

Quote taken from Mary J. Allen. 2002. *Outcomes Assessment Handbook*. On-line.

Abstract:

In the Fall semester 2006, I conducted a student-learning outcomes assessment project for PS 410 Political Theory. The students were given eight basic content knowledge questions to answer at home, which were collected and assessed. The syllabus contained detailed instructions concerning rubrics which were reinforced with class lectures, and it contained the essay topic questions for the first and second take-home essay exams. A final term paper was also required. A color-coded, holistic reading assessment was conducted for reliability. The assessment criteria were verified to support validity. The results of the assessment project show that student-learning did occur because the students demonstrated improved expository writing skills evidenced by their ability to construct a well-written term paper at the end of the semester when compared with their first and second essay exams. There was some improvement noted in the second set of essays compared to the first set. To further improve my instruction of the course and the students' future learning experience, I would change the course requirement and make essay writing a weekly classroom experience by tying the in-class writing to the lecture and course content. I would also develop rubrics for student discussion and in-class participation.

Introduction:

I conducted three previous student-learning outcomes (SLO) assessment projects. I attended the joint WASC and AAHE workshop entitled Building Learner-Centered Institutions held in Honolulu, Hawaii, from March 24-26, 2004. This study is influenced by Amy Driscoll (2004) “Closing the Loop...,” and the training I received from her at the workshop. The following report is based on data collected from the work of eight (8) out of fourteen (14) students from a Political Science course PS 410 Political Theory offered in the Fall semester 2006 at the University of Guam. The results show that the students did make some progress in acquiring both content knowledge and improved expository writing skills.

By expository writing I mean the ability to write logical, critical, reflective and argumentative essays. An expository essay is guided by a thesis statement that serves as the conclusion to an extended logical argument.

Purpose:

I wanted to conduct a student-learning outcomes assessment project in the Search for Meaning, General Education Category to measure the students' learning in expository essay writing. Expository essay writing provides demonstrated critical thinking skills. To close the loop, I

propose that the results of this survey be used to strengthen the learning objectives stated in the PS 410 course outline by making one of the learning objectives read “to demonstrate a command of college level expository writing skills.” I also propose that a similar learning objective be listed in the Search for Meaning, General Education category in the General Education Handbook.

Research Questions: How much basic content knowledge do the students have in entering the course, and upon completing the course are they able to demonstrate command of more complex content knowledge? What are the students demonstrated expository writing abilities, and will it improve with further instruction?

Method:

In the context of discussing with the students the importance of being a self-aware learner, a self-motivated learner and a learner with specific learning objectives and goals in mind, I encouraged the students to do their best in the course and to participate in the assessment project. In the syllabus and in classroom lecture and discussion, the students were informed about the assessment project, and asked to volunteer their work by signing an Assessment Release For (see attached). To make the results more robust, the work completed by those students who did not submit a release form were also included in this study. Those students who requested that their work not be included in the assessment study were excluded from the study. Some of the students dropped out of the course; some did not complete all of the work. Originally there were 14 students enrolled. Four volunteered to participate in the assessment study, and four did not respond so they were included. Four students did not want to be included and two students dropped the course.

The first day of the semester, students were given some basic content knowledge questions to answer at home. Some of the students began to answer the questions quickly in-class. For example, two of the eight questions asked are: what is philosophy and what is political science? (See attached Syllabus pg. 12). The students were given the course syllabus, and it was reviewed in class. The syllabus contains detailed instructions on how to complete the essay assignments (Syllabus 5), detailed instructions on how to write the expository essay (Syllabus 6), and guidelines concerning the grading criteria or rubrics regarding how many points are deducted for various types of errors (Syllabus 7). I reviewed the material in class with the students. After the first essays were returned, I instructed the students to review the directions given in the syllabus, and again I briefly reviewed those directions in lecture format with the students. After the second essays were returned, I again encouraged them to review the writing directions and to follow the directions carefully in preparing their final term papers.

I marked and graded the take-home test essays and the final term papers. A month after the course had concluded, I performed a holistic reading assessment by employing a color-coded assessment format. In an attempt to build some reliability for the assessment, a color-coded, holistic reading assessment was conducted after the papers had been evaluated and graded. To build validity, the assessment criteria were verified by employing standard expository essay rubrics. The reader’s code or the full grading criteria are written on the evaluated essay along

with the number of points being deducted. For example, the following rubrics were used.

Evaluation Rubrics

criteria	code	points deducted ¹
thesis not properly stated	TNP	-1 -2
no thesis	NT	-7-8
weak thesis	WkT	-5-6
off the topic	OT	-5 per-paragraph
repeating	Rep	-1 per-sentence
wrong word	WW	- 0-1/2
spelling error	word circled	-0-1/2
unclear ideas or grammar	???/~ wavy line	-1 per-sentence
no conclusion	NC	-7-8
weak paragraph transition	trans	-2
awkward expression	AWK	-1-2
vague and unclear ideas	curving underline	-3-5
weak argument development	curving underline	-3-5
no citation	Source?	-2 each occurrence
good point/idea/content	✓ check mark	+ 2
good statements	straight underline	+2-5
minimal content	ok	earning points
good work/content	good	earning points
developing an argument	good	earning points

Overall assessment:

the whole essay is not well structured	-10-15
the whole essay did not prove the thesis	-10-15
the whole essay is unclear	- 40
could not tell what question was being answered	- 40
short (3 page minimum)	- 4(1/4 page); -8(1/2 page); -16 (1 page)

Holistic Reading:

In performing the assessment, I conducted a holistic reading of the essays and color-coded the essays according to the following scheme:

color	general criteria
red	= major errors, not following directions
pink	= minor errors
green	= following directions
yellow	= good content, earning points

¹Per-50 point essay; a dash, “-,” is a minus sign.

Analysis:

In their initial responses to the “assessment survey questions,” the students demonstrated a minimal and insufficient knowledge of basic content. For example a few students did not answer the questions in complete sentence form. Even where complete sentences are given the content of the responses shows a lack of precise and educated understanding. For example consider some of the following replies to two of the questions:

What is Philosophy?

“Philosophy is an attempt to make sense of things.” “*knowledge, intelligent.”
“Philosophy is a way of thinking.” “The science of wisdom.” “It is the school of theory—teaches different outlooks on life from various perspectives.” “The study of why we do or believe something.”

What is science?

“The study of something.” “Study of all living things and matter.” “Art of inquiry.” “Knowledge.” “Science is the study of things.” “*dealing with living things and nonliving things.” “Science refers to observing things, places, people or events and learning from it through fist hand methods, observation, tests, data gathering, etc.”

These responses exhibit a minimal and pedestrian understanding.

The holistic reading shows that there was some improvement noted in the second set of essays compared to the first set of essays. Not all of the students submitted the first or second set of essays. The students who improved their writing the most choose not to participate in the assessment study.

The following chart provides a visual display of the gradual improvement made by the students.

Student number	Assessment Questions	1 st essays		2 nd essays		Final paper
		A	B	A	B	
001	VP ²	0	0	ok	ok	ok
002	VP	poor	poor	poor	poor	ok
003	poor	0	0	0	0	ok
004	ok	ok	ok	0	0	good
005	poor	poor	poor	ok	ok	ok
006 na	0	0	0	0	0	0
007	VP	VP	VP	0	0	0 dropped
008	poor	poor	poor	ok	ok	ok
009	poor	poor	poor	ok	ok	ok

². VP means “very poor.”

The results of the holistic reading and evaluation show that student-learning did occur because the students demonstrated improved expository writing skills evidenced by their ability to construct a well-written term paper at the end of the semester when compared with their first and second essay exams. To further improve my instruction of the course and the students' future learning experience, I would change the course requirements and make essay writing a weekly classroom experience by tying the in-class writing to the lecture and course content. I would also develop rubrics for student discussion and in-class participation.

Discussion:

I must admit that I expected the students already to be proficient expository essay writers because the course was a 400 level course for Juniors and Seniors. Because of the national trend in illiteracy especially for ethnic minorities, and because a number (3 out of 12) of the students in the course had English as a Second Language, the students' initial work as evidenced in their responses to the basic content knowledge questions and their first essays showed that they only held a minimal command of the subject matter and minimal writing skills.

After they received feedback on their writing and reviewed the directions again, their second set of essays showed some improvement. Although the turn-around time was short, I returned their second set of essays before the final term paper was due. So the students had received feedback on four (4) graded and corrected expository essays before their final term papers were submitted.

Conclusion—Closing the Loop:

To close the loop on various levels, the results of this assessment study should be used to:

- 1) improve my teaching of the course;
- 2) improve the learning objectives on the course outline form; and
- 3) improve the learning objectives for the Search for Meaning General Education category.

Bibliography

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