

How to Assess SLOS without a Rubric, or, Assessing SLOs Holistically

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While many people appreciate the use of rubrics, one can assess student learning outcomes (SLOs) with other techniques even if one is not a scientist who is familiar with data collection.

Holistic grading

How do you grade your student work? Do you use points for every section of their assigned work or do you assess the work on a number of dimensions and as a whole, assign a grade, and then translate it into points? The former technique works well with rubrics as they ‘chunk’ the work up into separate issues or areas and deal with each one and the points assigned to them. The latter technique doesn’t mesh well with rubrics as there are few connections between the areas listed in a rubric and how the points may be assigned across the work’s areas.

While rubrics (or rubric-like statements) can and should be used to give students some guidance in knowing what is expected, using them for grading purposes in very specific ways cannot always be accomplished. Rubrics can give some consistency to the grading process, however some of us have brains that don’t work well in that confining space – and we are still capable of assigning grades that are consistent with our colleagues. This workshop is designed for those of us with those non-rubric brains!

Holistic grading is all about taking the work as a whole rather than assessing each section or area separately. Hence – the whole (holistic) versus the parts (rubric sections). Students should receive feedback and suggestions for the areas that they are lacking but points assigned reflect the overall quality of the work.

Qualitative research methods

It is rarely possible to gather information (data) from all people in one’s group of study thus we must also concern ourselves with how we get the work from students to analyze.

If one is aware of the tenets of basic science, one realizes that the methods of data collection are important for the quality of the data and thus, the quality of the findings. Thus, the methods by which we collect the student work for our SLO assessment are important to consider so that we are collecting work that does give us a representative view of what all of our students are learning.

Truly random procedures require every student’s work to be a potential choice for study. Most of the time, we won’t really be able to do this since it involves much more time and ability than we may have. Using simple ‘convenience’ sampling is also a problem since using what we can get our hands on isn’t always representative of what is out there in the group we are studying.

Doing a targeted data collection process – or using sound judgment to decide how to collect your data - can help us ensure we have a picture of what is going on with different groups of students. It doesn’t give us a sense of how many students are performing at what level but it does give us a sense of what the students are learning at each level – thus letting us evaluate our SLOs to see what the students are actually learning or not.

We provide the following example of data collection that we believe gives us a reliable sense of how and what our students are learning in our classes.

An example: Our process

Data Collection Plan: Collect copies of student work from each class including and identified as written student work from three students in each of the following groups: high achieving, middle achieving, and low achieving.

- Near the end of the semester, remind each professor teaching the course to collect three copies of written work from each of the following types of students: high achieving, middle achieving, and low achieving.
- Make copies of the work, blocking out the names of the student and instructor. It is imperative to ensure confidentiality for both students and faculty. This is not a process for evaluating either students or instructors – it is a process to dig into what students are learning.
- Collect the assignment guidelines (or exam question) so that readers can identify the task given to the students. (One can assess what they provide knowing better the assignment guidelines thus avoiding the expectations of seeing work that was not requested.)
- Code each set with codes for the instructor, assignment type, and student type and number. Distribute these copies to the readers (full time faculty and invited adjuncts faculty who opt to participate) along with the SLO for the class. Readers should not be able to tell who the students are beyond whether they are in the high, middle, or low group and which assignment/class they are in nor should it be apparent who teaches the class for the assignment and work submitted.

Analysis – make sense of the data you collected through reading and re-reading the student work

- For all who are participating: *read through the student work*, grouped by class and *starting with the high achieving* students.
 - After reading all of the high achieving student work and considering the assignments given, consider how the work relates to the SLO(s), and document the similarities and differences that emerge.
- *Next, read through the middle achieving* students' work, organized by class (so you can keep cognizant of the assignment guidelines). Document the similarities and differences.
- *Lastly, read through the low achieving* students' work, organized by class (so you can keep cognizant of the assignment guidelines). Consider how the student work relates to the SLO(s), and document the similarities and differences.
- Read your notes on all three groups – consider how the student work relates to the SLO(s), and document the similarities and differences that appear across all three groups.
- Gather with the other readers and discuss the patterns you see from your reading of the students work.
- Document what you *all* noticed in your independent reading process – those are your major findings!
 - Discuss and decide what to do with patterns only some of you noticed – if they emerge as relevant to the analysis of all participants, add those to your major findings.

Conclusions – at this point, the process is the same whether or not you used rubrics to assess your SLOs.

- Take a look at those major findings and decide how those patterns relate to your SLO...
 - If all students are learning what your SLO says they should be learning, celebrate!
 - If students seem to have problems with some aspects but not with others, discuss those issues.
 - If students don't seem to be expressing anything near what your SLO says, discuss those issues.
- Decide what to do with these findings:
 - Re-write your SLOs – in case they don't define what you really want your students to be learning. In some cases, the first version of your SLOs will be what you end up discussing and revising. They may not capture what you really want your students to learn in your classes!
 - If your SLOs are well defined yet you find that students are having trouble reaching them, disseminate this information to your wider faculty and discuss your options. Share the findings with *all* faculty teaching the class - have a pedagogical and discipline-based discussion with the goal to better assist students in reaching the outcomes your SLO specifies.

This process takes longer for you to read and learn about than it does to actually do it! It takes a minimum amount of time to generate a lot of information about what your students are learning – which is invaluable for helping us do what we do more effectively.

Spring/Fall 2008 SLO Assessment of Sociology 1 – Introduction to Sociology

As holistic graders and sociologists with a variety of research methods training, we decided that we would assess our SLO for Soc 1 by doing a qualitative analysis.

Sociology 1 SLO: Ability to use a societal framework in order to analyze any given situation rather than an individual analysis.

In the Spring 2008 semester, the Department Chair requested from all faculty teaching Sociology 1 (Introduction to Sociology), copies of student work, taken from the end of the semester, and at three examples from each of the following groups: high achieving students, three middle achieving students, and three low achieving students.

The Chair removed names (both faculty and student) from these documents and coded them as follows: #X#, i.e., a number, a letter, and a number. This first number reflected the class, the letter was H, M, or L (for high, middle or low achievement), and the last number reflected the student. Thus we could tell which students were from which class/assignment and how many were in each group.

In our first read-through of the high achieving students' work, we found the following themes:

- Students did very well analyzing racial/ethnic issues from a societal perspective
- Students did a good job analyzing social class issues from a societal perspective
- Students had some difficulties analyzing gender issues from a societal perspective

With respect to the analyses of race, ethnicity, and class, students were able to discuss how society has a hand in constructing these categories and connecting how race and social class intertwine. However, when it came to gender, many high achieving students fall into reifying gender as natural and not socially created and maintained. They simply reviewed or summarized the relevant readings rather than analyzed or applied them.

Upon discussing this pattern, we realized that our students may need very clear and concise directions when asked to analyze (and not simply review or summarize). Students may be meandering through the concepts or summarizing a book when they are unclear about how to do a more thorough analysis.

To enable our students to do a higher level analysis, perhaps we can give them specific and parsed instruction rather than a general and dense set of instructions. For example, perhaps students can practice with aspects of these assignments throughout the semester, moving from summarizing and describing into application and analysis. Alternatively (or additionally), we can have them tackle a series of questions that ask for summary and then application in a step-by-step model.

We have continued thinking about this issue after our 'official' analysis. Beyond what we do here at the college, this issue taps into a larger pattern in sociological learning – that gender is indeed a difficult topic to understand sociologically. We continue to discuss this both locally and with our sociology colleagues at other institutions and in our professional associations.