



Los Angeles Valley College

Student Learning Outcomes Newsletter

September 2008

Welcome to the Year of Communication!

This is our first theme year focusing on one of our general education SLOs – communication skills. Opening Day, professional development and many other activities this year will focus on this theme. Try to think of ways for your department to get involved!

What's Happening Now?

Writing SLOs

- Approved SLOs have been posted on the Curriculum website (www.lavc.edu/vccc/courseoutlines.html).
- All faculty need to include approved SLOs in their syllabus (ACCJC requirement).
- ALL SLOs need to be written (if they haven't already) by the end of this year.

Assessing SLOs

- All disciplines need to assess at least one course this year.
- Rubric workshops will be conducted on Wednesday, October 1st and Thursday, November 6th (both from 1-2:30 in the PDC).

SLOs and Faculty Evaluation

Over the summer, faculty were presented with a new contract which contained in addition to Appendix C, the faculty evaluation form. The item states, “(For All Faculty) Participates in the Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Cycle (for classroom faculty, includes approved SLOs on class syllabi).”

So what is the Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Cycle (SLOAC) and how does one participate in it? The SLOAC begins when faculty develop an SLO statement and an assessment plan. The next step is to collect, analyze, and discuss the assessment data. Out of this come suggestions for improvement. Faculty then need to develop, modify, or revise curriculum, pedagogy, courses, programs or services as needed. Another possible revision is to the outcome statement or assessment tool itself. And then the cycle begins again. Several examples of this cycle will be discussed as we look at the results of our assessment pilots.

SLO Assessment Pilots

Last Spring, several disciplines piloted their SLO course-level assessments. Keep reading to find out what happened when the Writing Center (p. 2), Sociology (p. 3), Foreign Languages (p. 5) and Anthropology (p. 7) actually did an SLO assessment!



SLOs and Assessment: Formalizing the Familiar

Scott Weigand, Director, Writing Center

My participation in the SLO assessment pilot project this summer proved to be a valuable and productive experience. I volunteered for the project since I was already a member of the SLO committee, and since I had been involved in various forms of assessment and portfolio grading as an English instructor and director of The Writing Center. The process itself was very similar to the type of post-grading, end of the semester reflection that most instructors are already accustomed to doing. That is, from both informal conversations as well as more formalized group norming/portfolio grading sessions, I know that educators naturally engage in this practice of critically thinking about the strengths and weakness of a class or assignment as they look to find ways to continually improve their classes. The assessment of SLOs is really no different; it is only a more formalized way of documenting to what extent the students were successful in learning the most important concepts of a course or program.

When I sat down to begin the assessment of The Writing Center SLOs for English 67, I had a stack of portfolios from the students in the class, and what I thought was my perfect rubric for evaluation. However, when I began to look a bit more closely at the SLOs I had drafted and the language of the rubric that I was planning on using, I realized that it wasn't quite the right match. The language of the rubric generically addressed the quality of writing for a particular type of essay, whereas the SLO for English 67 was more focused on the student's understanding and ability to use the various stages of the writing process. After a few unsuccessful Internet searches for English rubrics that addressed the writing process, I decided that the best thing

would be to redesign my existing rubric to make sure it truly reflected the nature of what I was evaluating. This was relatively easy in that I knew what I was after, and with hundreds of existing rubrics already online as guides, it was merely of rewriting the language on the existing rubric to more closely reflect what I was actually evaluating.

For those disciplines that have chosen to use rubrics as a means of evaluation, there will be a real opportunity for collaboration within the department in either creating a new rubric from scratch or revising an existing rubric—as this was my experience in discussing the rubric with The Writing Center staff and other colleagues as well. Engaging in a discussion about how we are evaluating the work of our students provides us with the chance to share ideas about both practice and pedagogy, and to really discuss the nuts and bolts of what we are doing in the classroom. Unfortunately, this type of sharing doesn't seem to happen often enough.

After I had my rubric in place, I proceeded with evaluating the students' portfolios by using a four-point number system that I had incorporated into the rubric. As I was reading through the folders, I found that some students had more successfully achieved the SLO than others, as was to be expected. However, by the end of evaluation, I began to notice a pattern where practically all the students seemed to be confused about some of the differences between revising and editing a paper. In turn, very few of the students were achieving the highest score on the rubric for this particular part of the writing process. This naturally prompted me to look back

through my assignment sheet and reevaluate how this particular section was being taught.

This is where the assessment component really came into place. After completing the process, it was evident that in order for the students to have a better chance of successfully achieving the SLO, I would need to clarify and adjust one of the assignments. If only one or two students had difficulty with this section of the class, my assessment would have been different; however, since the majority of the students' work reflected a lack of understanding the concept, it was clear that there needed to be a change. As I am putting the syllabus and assignment sheet together for English 67 for the fall semester, I am making a rather significant adjustment in terms scaffolding the various steps involved in the different ways to revise a paper.

And so goes the assessment cycle. At the end of the fall semester, I will once again evaluate to what extent the students achieved the SLOs for the course and assess what might need to be adjusted in the course or assignments. I am curious to see what sort of impact the changes I am making in the course will have on the success of the students. Again, my experience in this pilot project proved to be useful, yet it wasn't anything too radically different than typical reflection I do at the end of teaching a course. This time around, I merely documented the steps along the way, and approached the process in a more systematic way, which should ultimately prove useful in terms of tracking the improvement of the course over a longer period of time.



SLO Assessment without a Rubric

Pilot SLO Assessment of Sociology 1: Introduction to Sociology, 2008

Tiffany Lanoix and Sally Raskoff (on behalf of the Sociology discipline)

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

In the Spring 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 least three examples from each of the following groups: high achieving students, three middle achieving students, and three low achieving students.

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

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. The first number signifies the student level of achievement; the second character – letter – indicated an instructor; the last character – number – signifies the number of student within the level and instructor sample. For example, 1A1 is coded for the first high achieving student for Instructor A and 3F2 is coded for the second low achieving student for Instructor F. These codes allowed us to keep track of what level we were assessing across different classes – and to keep each student's work together and not mixed up with that of others. The Chair also included

a copy of the assignment's instructions coded with the Instructor's code (A, B, etc.) so that if we had questions about what the students were doing, we could check their guidelines.

The identity of the students and the instructors was important to keep confidential to those assessing the work so that any bias (positive or negative) would be kept to a minimum. (Qualitative methodology and many sociological theories hold that complete objectivity is not humanly possible but that there are techniques to keep subjectivity as low as possible.)

We began our assessment with these packets and read through the work of the high achieving students. Why these papers? If we had found that these students were not able to use a societal framework (see our SLO), then we would expect that the middle and low achieving students would also have problems (which we would check by assessing them as well). If however we found that the high achieving students were doing fine, we could move past them and on to the middle students. Either way, reading these first streamlined our assessment process and gave us some patterns to use for comparison with the other two groups.

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 might 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. They may not have the tools to do an application or in-depth analysis unless we walk them through it.

Upon reading the work of middle and low achieving students, these patterns hold true and in fact are exacerbated. In the medium papers, the patterns were similar to those in the high level, just more pronounced. Some of the writing was superficial and did not completely answer the question or follow instructions. Again, they seem to be better able to grasp race than gender/class. They lack discussion of the consequences of gender and class and are more descriptive than analytical.

The low papers show a lack of ability to express their arguments clearly, perhaps because they do not completely understand the materials that they were drawing from. They appear unable to clearly connect sociological theories/concepts with their arguments; they tend to use an individual analysis instead of a sociological analysis. It seems like they "fell back" on their individual experiences when they did not know how to complete the assignment.

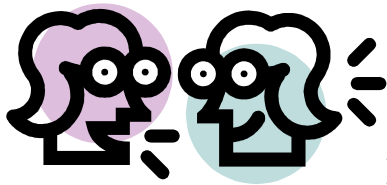
These patterns were not surprising to us yet it was fascinating to see them so clearly in this assessment process. Each of us had a similar sense from our own classes that students have varying degrees of ability and motivation in applying new concepts rather than just memorizing them as vocabulary. However, this process clearly showed us the sociological content that was proving to be the largest challenge (gender and social class) thus giving us a place to start when improving our program.

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.

The results of this analysis suggest that we hold some pedagogical discussions and workshops with our faculty to share these findings and discuss as a whole what we can do to help all of our students do better in gaining a better sense of a sociological imagination.

We have already held two “pedagogical picnics” this year with faculty who teach the same class gathering to discuss ideas on what works and what could work. As a result of this assessment, we will continue these gatherings and discuss these findings specifically and work as a group to tackle these issues. (Doing this at department meetings is impossible since we are a multi-disciplinary department and few adjunct – who are the majority of our instructors – can attend the regular departmental meetings no matter when we schedule them.)



Foreign Language Pilot Assessment Report

Rafael Arias, Spanish

During the Spring Semester of 2008, professors Arias and Francés-Benítez (Spanish) and Merrill (French) from the Foreign Language Department took part in an assessment pilot study of the linguistic Foreign Language 1 SLO. This SLO states “Using the vocabulary and structures learned, students will be able to perform elementary everyday communicative functions in the target language orally and in writing.”

Evidence of SLO attainment for this pilot program included:

1. Oral presentations in the target language (Francés-Benitez);
2. Taped oral communicative situations (Arias);
3. Dialogues written in the target language and performed orally without cues (Merrill).

A linguistic rubric and a scoring instrument (see SLO website) were developed to

- 1) assess the students’ linguistic output;
- 2) achieve consistency among the raters;

- 3) keep records of the scoring for the students and for the purposes of this pilot assessment program.

The Rubric was designed to provide data on 5 language indicators:

1. Content: Ability to formulate and prepare a communicative function.
2. Comprehensibility: Ability to make oneself heard and understood;
3. Fluency: Ability to express oneself orally;
4. Accuracy: Ability to use grammar and vocabulary correctly;
5. Presentation skills: Ability to demonstrate/dramatize the language sample/linguistic evidence.

In order to differentiate between different levels of achievement, every indicator was rated as: 1 (Complete/excellent); 2 (Generally complete/acceptable); and 3 (Incomplete/Poor). User-friendly explanations of the ratings were provided to the three raters as part of the rubric. A student obtaining a score between 7-15

points was considered as having achieved the SLO; students obtaining a score between 1-6 were considered as not having achieved the SLO.

The three raters reported that 100% of the students (58/58) achieved the linguistic SLO in their classes. The maximum score for each indicator was 3. The average score breakdown by language indicators for the 56 students assessed for this pilot is as follows:

| INDICATOR | AVERAGE SCORE |
|---------------------|---------------|
| Content | 2.78 |
| Comprehensibility | 2.62 |
| Fluency | 2.6 |
| Accuracy | 2.55 |
| Presentation Skills | 2.64 |

It was not surprising that 100% of the students achieved the SLO for the three sections that took part in this pilot. Since the FL Department stresses communicative language teaching, most students that complete the semester are generally able to perform communicative functions at the basic level in the target language by the end of the semester. The lowest scores for all three sections were Accuracy (2.55), Fluency (2.6), and Comprehensibility (2.62). Content and Presentation skills obtained the highest scores. The data obtained also showed some alignment by languages: The scores for the two Spanish sections indicate that Comprehensibility and Fluency are the lowest indicators for Spanish, whereas the French scores indicate that Presentation skills and Content were the lowest indicators for French. It is not clear whether this discrepancy is due to the students' linguistic performance or to raters' differences in using the scoring instrument.

Since students were given the opportunity to prepare/write their dialogues/presentations before their linguistic performance, Content and Presentation skills have the highest scores for the 3 sections. One possible interpretation of these results is that the professors in this pilot study corrected

students' presentation drafts, pointed out grammatical errors, and gave feedback on the students' presentations before their oral assessment. This "process writing approach" gives students opportunities to correct their written and grammatical output and to hone their presentation skills before their oral performance.

The students were also given opportunities to rehearse their dialogues/presentations orally and to receive feedback on their oral performance. However, (oral) accuracy, fluency, and comprehensibility (which obtained the lowest scores) are more performance-oriented indicators. It is possible that, although students' written presentations/communicative situations were generally free from grammatical errors, the oral performances of the projects were less accurate in terms of pronunciation and the students' ability to express and make themselves understood in the target language.

To the question "What changes could be introduced in this course to increase the FL 1 oral SLO success rate for all performance indicators?" the three instructors offered these suggestions:

1. Classroom practices:
 - Increase the use of speaking (pair work and whole class) in the classroom.
 - Focus on pronunciation practice.
 - Conduct more reading aloud activities in the classroom.
2. Logistics:
 - Introduce the activity with a group "practice dialogue" so individual students know what would be expected of them.
 - Give students a longer time frame by starting work on this project earlier in the semester.

Reflecting on the assessment process itself, it is plausible that the different scores for "accuracy" may have been related to the raters' different understanding of the scope

of the term. Some raters seem to have used the ‘accuracy’ indicator to rate pronunciation, whereas others seem to have rated pronunciation under “comprehensibility”.

In order to achieve some faculty consensus and consistency in their assessment of the students’ SLO achievement, it would be advisable to in future FL SLO assessments to:

1. Clarify and/or redefine the language indicators included in the rubric in order to improve raters’



Anthropology 101 Pilot Assessment Report

Rebecca Stein, Anthropology

Anthropology 101: Human Biological Evolution is an introductory course in biological anthropology and counts towards the natural science general education requirement. The content of the course has four main areas: evolutionary theory, the primate order, the fossil record, and modern humans (including such topics as modern human biological diversity). The student learning outcome for the course is that students will be able to analyze human anatomy and behavior from an evolutionary perspective.

In the Spring 2008 semester, seven sections of the course were offered, including two online sections. The pilot assessment involved my two online sections and Toni Edge’s regular section. For the assessment, we assigned the same essay that was completed by students as a take-home assignment. We each weighted the assignment differently and assigned grades independently, but for the assessment developed a common rubric (available on the SLO website).

understanding of the language indicators to be assessed.

2. Improve raters’ scoring reliability/consistency.
3. Rework the scoring instrument in order to achieve a more cogent language scoring breakdown.

The results of this SLO assessment pilot will be shared with the rest of the Foreign Language faculty so that we, as a group, can participate in the SLO assessment cycle and develop specific strategies to help our students improve their oral SLO.

Essay assignment:

As opposed to terms like “hominin”, the term “human” is a nonscientific term and thus more open to interpretation. What do you feel defines us as “humans”? What differentiates us from our closest relatives, the chimpanzees? Which is the first species in the hominin lineage that you would be willing to label “human” and why?

Write an essay (4-5 pages in length) to address these questions. There are many possible correct answers to the questions – you will be graded on internal consistency, how well you support your choices, and the knowledge of course material you exhibit. Be sure to address aspects of both anatomy and behavior in your response. Your response should address multiple criteria and these same criteria should be addressed for all three questions.

The elements of the rubric were:

1) understanding of evolutionary theory, 2) human definition, 3) chimpanzee comparison, 4) the fossil record, 5) critical thinking skills, and 6) communication skills (the complete rubric can be found on the SLO website). Each essay could earn a 3 (best) to 1 (worst) in each category.

The averages were:

- Human definition – 2.31
- Critical thinking – 2.09
- Communication – 2.05
- Chimpanzee comparison – 1.87
- Understanding evolutionary theory – 1.82
- Fossil record – 1.51

From these results, we saw that the fossil record was the area of greatest concern, followed by the general understanding of evolutionary theory.

In our preliminary discussion of how to improve student learning, several potential areas emerged:

- 1) The assignment instructions may need to be more explicit about the need to address pertinent evolutionary theory.
- 2) How we present the material on the fossil record needs to be revisited. The amount of information on the hominin fossil record grows every year and the presentation of this material can easily become an endless stream of factoids – dates, places, names, skeletal features, etc. Although several instructors in the discipline had discussed previously which species need to be covered and which do not (as part of revision of the course outline), not all instructors may be aware of this and we all need to look at better ways to present the material (e.g., more thematically).

We will be meeting with the other instructors of this course to discuss the results of the pilot assessment and potential improvements to the course.



Have questions about SLOs?

Check out the SLO webpage (www.lavc.edu/slo) or contact the SLO Coordinator, Rebecca Stein (steinrl@lavc.edu, x2538).