Thriving in Academe

REFLECTIONS ON HELPING STUDENTS LEARN

Thriving in Academe is a joint project of NEA and the Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org). For more information, contact the editor, Douglas Robertson (drobert@fiu.edu) at Florida International University or Mary Ellen Flannery (mflannery@nea.org) at NEA.

Making SLO Assessment Productive and Fun

Faculty, Assessment, Productive, and Fun. These four words are not usually said in the same breath. However they can be. We can prove it.

BY BETH LASKY, ANU THAKUR, NINA GOLDEN, MINTESNOT WOLDEAMANUEL, ASHLEY SAMSON, AND GIGI HESSAMIAN
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Like most colleges and universities our campus is mandated to conduct program assessments of our Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs). Often this mandate is implemented by a top-down approach in which faculty are directed to **"use this tool to assess your classes and or programs!"** If you heard the voice of Charlton Heston or Morgan Freeman, you get the point. This directive is often met with rolled eyes, questions about academic freedom, or just plain refusal. Some faculty feel students' grades on assignments and overall course grades reflect how well their students have met the SLOs. Other faculty are not even aware there are SLOs they need to meet.

In this article we will describe the process we went through to assess the specific learning objectives for one of our General Education (GE) sections—Comparative Cultural Studies (CCS). Not only did we learn a lot about working together as a committee, including part-time and full-time faculty, we all had such a good time that we kept meeting even after we finished our task! We feel that sharing our process will allow other campuses to benefit from our experiences. Mandated directives about assessing SLOs do not have to be a burden. We found that bringing together faculty from various disciplines is not only an asset but can produce tools that can be used across campus.

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Participation Can be Painless

We have all been at the place, say a department meeting perhaps, where we are told not only what to assess but what tools to use for the assessment process. How many times have we said, "That won't work in my course, or in my discipline?"

As the director of General Education and the coordinator of Academic Assessment at our university, we were part of a group that helped establish GE assessment on our campus. During the strategic planning process, we agreed that simply telling faculty what tools to use for assessment would not work. We needed to create a plan that placed decision-making in the hands of the faculty. Our campus GE program has seven sections, including natural sciences, arts and humanities, and more. Each section has its own goals and SLOs. We decided to begin with the GE section of *Comparative Cultural Studies/ Gender, Race, Class, Ethnicity Studies and Foreign Languages (CCS)* to follow with our GE course recertification process. Our first task was to put together a committee to design a process to assess the SLOs for CCS.

Establishing the Committee

To begin, a questionnaire to gain information about who was teaching CCS courses was distributed, via department chairs, to faculty. After respondents emailed back, the GE program director went through the

TALES FROM REAL LIFE > HOW RUBRICS CAN WORK

At our first CCS committee meeting, I remember thinking that we were a diverse group with little in common. Once we began discussing our courses and pedagogy, we found that in fact we had one thing in common: we all required students to reflect on topics such as cultural diversity in written assignments. Over the course of many meetings we developed a tool to assess how successful students were in reaching the set learning outcomes. Along the way we fine-tuned the tool through discussions and norming sessions. So long as home-baked pumpkin bread and multi-colored post-its were provided, we were content.

Most of us with years of teaching experience develop a sense of what makes a good paper. But having a rubric allows me to quantify that sense, makes grading faster, and most importantly, tells students what I expect of them. For every paper that I assign in every class, I post a rubric before the paper is due, and return a completed rubric with their grade. Creating and implementing the CCS rubric has made me a more effective instructor and I know that my colleagues from the committee feel the same way.

BY NINA GOLDEN

responses and formed a committee, ensuring a diverse group. (See Best Practices.) Selected faculty were invited and informed they would receive $100 for every meeting.

Getting Together

At first bringing together instructors from five departments seemed like a crazy idea. How would five instructors who teach five different courses ever come to a consensus on how to assess the five CCS SLOs? The purpose of our first meeting was simply to get to know each other and to discuss the goals and expectations of the committee. Everyone briefly shared the structure of the CCS class they taught, while committee coordinators discussed potential assessment strategies to initiate the thought process. The meeting concluded with a discussion of our goals and expectations—to design a way to assess the CCS SLOs across their five courses. As we left, members promised to look at their own course to determine if and how it met the SLOs, and to return with samples of assignments and thoughts about the assessment strategy and process.

Deciding on a Tool

Our second committee meeting lasted a bit longer. Each member provided information about his or her course, assignments used and how they addressed the CCS SLOs. Although the courses included ranged from Cities of the Third World to Women in Sports, as Mintesnot remembers, "The pivotal moment in the process was when we discovered that the varying sample assignments had one thing in common: all were reflection essay assignments. The assignments asked students to reflect on certain cultural issues, and how the course content changed their perspective. This made the entire process focus on developing an assessment tool on reflection assignments. To do that, we shared our individual experiences on how we assess assignments."

> **"I AM MORE** EFFICIENT, STRUCTURED, AND THOROUGH IN ALL MY COURSE REQUIREMENTS…"

Finally, the committee discussed tools to assess reflection papers. One member used a scale based on timeliness, quality of writing, and whether the student followed directions. Rubric samples were shared, and types and merits were discussed. The meeting ended with everyone agreeing to try writing benchmarks for the reflection assignment that met the SLOs.

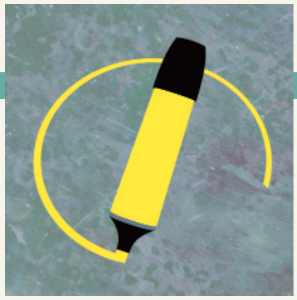
Getting into Rubrics

Most of the benchmarks brought to the third meeting focused on the content and form of the papers. All brought checklists or holistic rubrics. After sharing some examples of analytical rubrics, a fruitful discussion around grading scales occurred. We began to draft a rubric and then revised it via email. Before the calibration meeting to determine its effectiveness, each member submitted a reflection paper from a previous semester. At the calibration meeting, we practiced using the rubric until everyone was able to score the same paper with a similar rating. By the end of this long meeting everyone felt they had a good understanding of how to use the CCS rubric.

A full day with lots of highlighters and food was set aside to use the finalized rubric. Before the meeting the members were asked to provide 15 student papers from previous semesters, representing a good mix of high to low quality. Eight papers were randomly selected from the 15 papers brought by each faculty, for a total of 40 samples. They were duplicated and numbered. Then, each paper was rated by two committee members, with each member scoring 16 papers. The coordinator for Assessment shared the results at a final meeting.

Sharing the Rubric

At the beginning of the 2013-14 school year the committee reconvened (without the $100 meeting stipend) and decided they wanted to share the rubric as a grading/assessment tool with CCS faculty across the campus. If the rubric could be widely ad-



BEST PRACTICES > GETTING AND KEEPING FACULTY INVOLVED

We found that our success hinged on a few easy strategies. First, we remained focused. We started with one area, and treated it like a pilot program that would provide insights on ways to scale up. Second, we prioritized variety among our members, including length of time teaching a GE course, the college/department the instructor was from, the course they taught, their rank, etc. Including part-time faculty was not only beneficial to our committee, but also to the instructors. This best practice ensured more buy-in across campus when we shared our rubric. Third, make the meetings short and fun! Except for the calibration and scoring meetings, none went longer than 90 minutes. In addition, at least one home baked yummy was served, and we gave out other treats like colored pens. Although participants received $100 per meeting during the first year, they continued to attend after the stipends ended. Paying for members to present and attend conferences was a wonderful perk. Because we tied the rubric to the SLOs, two different courses went through our campus recertification process with ease. Finally, letters of appreciation from the director of GE were placed in participants' professional files to use for promotion and tenure. Ashley said it best, "I looked forward to coming to these meetings. My colleagues couldn't believe it!"

opted, we could likely collect large samples of data from various departments. The director of GE emailed all chairs and asked for 5-10 minutes at upcoming meetings. Twenty-one of the 28 departments welcomed a discussion, provided by one or two committee members, about the new rubric and how to use it. Additional presentations were also made at meetings of associate deans, college/department assessment liaisons and various curriculum committees. In addition, the committee presented their process, rubric, and results at two assessment retreats.

Surveying the Students

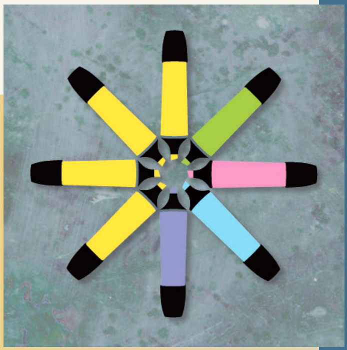
With the CCS rubric being used in many courses, the committee decided in fall 2013 to add an indirect assessment component. They designed a student survey to be distributed at the beginning and end of courses. The purpose was to determine why students take their course and then to find out their opinion of the course after completion.

Final Opportunities and Lessons Learned

Four of the five committee members attended the Association of American Colleges and Universities Conference (AAC&U) on General Education and Assessment in Portland, Ore. In addition, they presented at the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Academic Resource Conference, in Los Angeles, on this process and what was learned.

At the last meeting, everyone shared what they learned from the process. You have already heard from Nina. GiGi said this: "From discussions with my committee and participation in two assessment conferences attended largely by full-time faculty, I learned about assessment issues at national and state levels. But why was this information mostly new to me? Because part-time faculty are by-and-large absent from policy-related, decision-making processes, their involvement relegated to times of enforcement which can create a disconnect or worse, breed resistance." Finally, Ashley: "I am more efficient, structured, and thorough in all my course requirements and am able to make sure that they line up more congruently with the SLO's. The students have also benefited from having a structured rubric in place from the start, so that they know what they will be evaluated on.' None of these members had used rubrics before, now they all use them!

ISSUES TO CONSIDER



HOW TO MAKE A RUBRIC

How was the rubric designed?
First we identified key SLO terms that should be included in the assessment. These included self-awareness, knowledge, and empathy. We also discussed the criteria for grading. Drafts were shared electronically until everyone felt we had a rubric they could use effectively.

What did the calibration meeting look like?
Each member was given a copy of the CCS rubric, five different colored highlighters, and randomly selected student reflection papers. To begin, they were told to use the yellow highlighter where the author addressed the component of "reflection." Then we discussed our reasoning. After agreement was reached around reflection, the same process was done using a blue highlighter for the area of "empathy," green for "observations," pink for "application of knowledge," and finally, a purple for "writing and organization." In case of discrepancies, we discussed our reasons for scoring until a consensus was reached. If the rubric's wording was found too ambiguous, it was changed to everyone's liking.

How was the rubric validated?
To ensure the rubric could be used with a number of assignments, we spent one day grading multiple papers. Before the meeting, each of the five members were asked to provide 15 student reflection papers, submitted in previous semesters, of varying quality. After a random selection, we had 40 papers — and each member received 16 to score. After all papers were scored — every paper was scored, independently, by two readers — the results were tabulated and discussed.

How was the rubric disseminated?
A request was sent to all departments offering CCS courses asking for 5-10 minutes at upcoming department meetings. Twenty-one of 28 departments welcomed a discussion about the new rubric and how to use it. One or two committee members presented at each meeting. Additional presentations were made to associate deans, college and department assessment liaisons, and various curriculum committees. In addition, the committee made presentations at two campus assessment retreats and one regional conference.

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