The Assessment Times

Harold Washington College Assessment Committee (HWCAC)
Spring 2019
Webpage: www.ccc.edu/hwcassessment

HWC Mission

Harold Washington College is a student-centered institution that empowers all members of its community through accessible and affordable academic advancement, career development and personal enrichment. To fulfill this mission, Harold Washington College focuses on the following core values: We embrace human diversity; care about the whole student; offer responsive and relevant education; pursue academic excellence; assess to improve learning; build community; foster global citizenship for social justice .
Through these core values, we strive to embody and honor the vision of Harold Washington, former Mayor of Chicago.

From the Chair

Artisanal Assessment as Professional Development

Jeffrey Swigart

Our Assessment Committee is, among other things, an intense form of professional development for those involved in our weekly meetings and ongoing work. Since 2012, we have had 31 different faculty members serve on committee positions, with even more participating in the meetings without official positions. This is as far back as we have carefully counted, but the number is even higher when looking all the way back to the creation of the committee in 2003. These faculty members, including myself, have learned so much about assessing student learning, and they have brought that training back to their departments and students in everything they do.
We need to have a culture of assessment running through all aspects of our teaching, not out of compliance, but rather out of an understanding that it will improve us and our students. We know this will only happen if we make it a priority, and so we are thankful for the support we receive from our administration through release time and stipends. We need this structure of assessment built in, to give us structured space to slow down and consider what we already know about student learning, what we wonder about student learning, and to translate what we learn into efforts to improve student learning, including how we might adapt our own instructional methods.

We were also glad to see assessment mentioned so many times in our college's recent positive evaluation on accreditation. But what matters most to us is how the assessment process benefits our students.
Our committee's unit liaisons are like the grassroots organizers in this process, working with their academic departments to keep assessment as close to the students as possible. The liaisons look at highly specific issues of learning while avoiding broad generalizations. They plan, collect data, analyze, reflect, and recommend. Since it is all faculty-driven, the work is very personalized to our institution. We like to think of unit-level assessment as our artisanal, handcrafted, or small-batch assessment. Unsurprisingly, this work has often influenced departments to recommend curricular and pedagogical changes, including what content to focus on or how a rubric is written.
We are always rejuvenated by new members at our Wednesday meetings at 3PM in Room 1046. One-time visitors are welcome too, even if you simply want to grab one of our famous artisanal snacks. We hope to see you there.

In This Issue

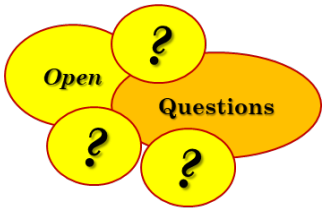
CITY COLLEGES of CHICAGO
Harold Washington
Education that Works

Research Analysis:

Analysis of Open-Ended Responses

Fernando Miranda-Mendoza, Research Analyst

Our assessment endeavors often incite us to create assessment tools that contain one or more open-ended questions. Open-ended questions give us the opportunity to learn about students' opinions, feelings, and unique thoughts, as expressed in their very own words. These questions allow us to discover opinions or ideas that might be unexpected and that would be lost in alternative closed-ended questions. Hence, open-ended questions are a valuable component in many of our assessments. Nevertheless, open-ended questions pose unique challenges, since data collected from them is often difficult to summarize and may be very hard to analyze.



What can we do with open-ended responses data? Can we even analyze them in a meaningful way? Is it even worth trying? Contrary to what qualitative analysis skeptics might believe, open-ended responses are not exclusively found in social science studies. Modern private corporations also have a need to analyze open-ended survey responses and draw conclusions from them. For these entities, employees or customers' unique responses often yield valuable insights. Hence, several methods to analyze open-ended responses have been developed within and outside academia. Some methods have a high degree of sophistication, while others have a mere exploratory goal. Recent assessment endeavors in the committee have, generally, used methods that are not excessively sophisticated. Unlike a private corporation whose interests may lie on items like "customer satisfaction," our committee aims to learn from assessment data in order to inform future improvement of learning.

Previous assessments have focused on the analysis of students' comments based on categories that we predefined ahead of time (as done in our most recent Quantitative Reasoning college-wide assessment) or on trends that we hope to discover from data (as we intend to do in our Civic Engagement college-wide assessment).

Methods to analyze open-ended responses are different from those for quantitative responses. A typical analysis consists of the following steps: 1) identify overall "trends" from responses; 2) determine "codes" (based on the previously identified trends) in which to classify all responses; 3) create categories based on the codes; 4) analyze the resulting categories (with standard statistical methods used for qualitative variables).

Some issues with the approach just outlined are: it is time-consuming to manually code all responses; it requires "norming" sessions to bring all human raters to be somewhat consistent; and it is an error-prone process. A possible remedy to these issues consists in carefully looking at sufficiently large (but not too large!) subsets of randomly selected responses, but not all of the responses, in order to look for trends and determine codes. With this approach, the number of human raters (and the time spent rating) is decreased without excessively compromising possible findings. Indeed, this approach of looking at a subset of random responses and then contrasting the findings to another subset of random responses, somewhat mimics the structure of methods currently used in data mining, machine learning, and artificial intelligence. Nowadays, techniques and tools used in those fields are becoming more widely available and, in the near future, we may incorporate some of those methods in our analyses of open-ended responses. For instance, a "natural language processing" open-source tool to aid in analyzing text is already available (it is called "Natural Language Toolkit" and available at https://www.nltk.org/). Also, recent academic research has attempted to incorporate this type of tool into, precisely, the analysis of open-ended responses. (see, for instance, Card, D., & Smith, N. A. (2015). Automated Coding of Open-Ended Survey Responses. Available at https://www.ml.cmu.edu/research/dap-papers/DAP_Card.pdf).

As statistical methods and textual analysis technologies advance, our committee's research data analysts will be better equipped to use these advances to expedite and enhance the analysis of open-ended responses. Indeed, the future is already here.

Civic Engagement: Student Perceptions

Carrie Nepstad, Vice Chair of General Education Assessment

During the fall 2018 semester, the AC administered a survey in order to learn more about student perceptions of Civic Engagement. This is often our first step in an assessment process. We want to know what students think before we design a direct tool to assess what they know. We invited faculty to administer the survey. As is our practice, we always seek volunteers to participate in assessment. Thanks to the participation of many instructors who shared the assessment tool with their students, there were 1,122 completed responses.

We are currently in the process of formally analyzing the data, which will be presented in a final report, but we thought it might be interesting to share some of the initial thoughts about the findings from one of the open-ended questions:

Please tell us about an experience at CCC/HWC that has influenced your civic engagement.

875 students answered this open-ended question. Of those, 93 responded with words like "none" or "Not at all" and 69 responded with "N/A". Several of the N/A responses included qualifiers like "because I only take online classes" or "not yet", "I just started college" or "I'm not in any clubs" or "I'm full-time at a university and only taking one course here".

Of the 713 remaining responses to this question, a few themes are emerging from the data:

1) Students named and listed various co-curricular areas as specific influences on their civic engagement:

a. **Events:** job fair, field trips, Model UN, One Million Degrees, Holocaust survivor presentation, Hispanic Heritage month, club day

b. **Voting:** voting for SGA, voter registration drive, "other students encouraged me to vote," "members of SGA talked to me and I registered to vote"

c. **Spaces on campus:** library, healthy food pantry, DAC, tutoring, advising, "walking the halls," "hanging out in clubs"

d. **Communication:** HWC announcements, community boards, flyers, posters

2) Students stated that simply being a student, going to classes, and "walking the halls" of HWC have influenced their civic engagement.

a. **Being a student:** "seeing other students lining up to register to vote", "I am more aware of people with different backgrounds", "it's helped me to accept other races and nationalities", "being part of a black college", "walking in and out every day."

b. **Peers:** "meeting students who are not citizens and fighting for their rights", "I helped my peers solve a problem on assignments – study group", "just hanging around clubs," "seeing other women be active and involved."

3) Students named and listed many course experiences as specific influences on their civic engagement.

a. **In-class Announcements:** voter registration, events, healthy food pantry

b. **Assignments:** Discussion boards, Papers, Speeches, Field trips, projects

i. **Community involvement:** They described how specific assignments helped them to get directly involved in a community project, Chicago politics, volunteerism.

ii. **Perspective shift:** They described how specific assignments or course experiences changed their perspective on particular groups in society such as women, immigrants, those in the criminal justice system, the LGBTQ+ community, politicians.

c. **Conversations with instructors:** office hours, e-mails, discussions in class, discussions outside of class, conversations on field trips and at events, seeing instructors protesting for a fair contract, and seeing instructors "being brave."

> ***From Encyclopedia Britannica:***
> ***"Civic engagement**, broad set of practices and attitudes of involvement in social and political life that converge to increase the health of a democratic society."*

These are some of the themes that have emerged from just one of the four open-ended questions. The other questions ask students about experiences outside of HWC that influenced their civic engagement and what questions they have about civic engagement. We anticipate that the results and recommendations in the full report may inspire conversations among faculty as well as administrators and staff as we consider the many ways HWC supports civic engagement, and as we continue to explore new and innovative strategies for improving student learning in civic engagement. Please stay tuned!

https://cdn.pixabay.com/photo/2016/10/25/00/29/unity-1767663_960_720.jpg

A Student Love Fest?

Mike Heathfield, Coordinator of Co-curricular Assessment

As part of our reaffirmation process, HLC conducted an electronic opinion survey of our students in the spring semester of 2018. Students were asked 15 different questions about all aspects of HWC functioning, responding through a five-point Likert-type scale from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). They were also allowed to opt out of any question. There were a total of 238 respondents; and on-ground (F2F), female, AA-enrolled, 20-22 year olds dominated this student sample.

All 15 questions scored in the positive range - above neutral. These students were "satisfied" with HWC's performance in a range of areas.

The top nine responses – scoring a mean from all respondents above 4 (agree) – were as follows:

Question	Mean Score	Total Responses	% Agreement
Faculty who teach are knowledgeable about their subject areas.	**4.17**	**231**	**81.8%**
An academic advisor was available to help me with questions about my course of study.	**4.16**	**229**	**79.0%**
An academic advisor provided me with accurate information about the requirements necessary to fulfill my course of study.	**4.14**	**227**	**75.7%**
Overall, I am satisfied with my experience at the school.	**4.12**	**231**	**80.5%**
The communication I received from the school about the over-all enrollment process was clear.	**4.08**	**235**	**78.7%**
I am satisfied with the progress I am making toward completing my degree.	**4.08**	**226**	**78.3%**
I received clear information as to how much my education would cost.	**4.07**	**235**	**76.1%**
I was placed at the appropriate course level that matched my academic preparation.	**4.05**	**229**	**79.4%**
Faculty are available when I need help.	**4.03**	**230**	**81.8%**

These data provide some important background context on which we will build our new assessment of co-curricular learning. Co-curricular learning is usually defined through the specific student learning outcomes that drive core activities, programs, and services that support classroom learning. There is good news here about course placement, student progress, information and communication, faculty, and advisors. This is a small sample for sure, but we should be proud of the picture of strength these students shared about us. Love moves in mysterious ways!

What's in a Name?

Kristin Marie Bivens, Unit Liaison for English, Speech, Theater

The support services the Disability Access Center (DAC) provide our students are incomparable and essential to teaching diverse learners and assessing learning at HWC. Providing support to students with cognitive and physical disabilities is of the utmost importance regarding keeping HWC accessible for our students, as well as remaining compliant with federal statutes and mandates, like the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

However, what if our students' learning is impaired by a potentially stigmatizing name? Recently, I tweeted the following (see Figures 1 and 2):

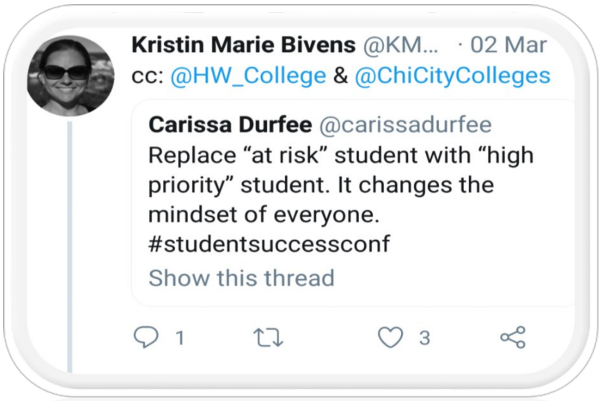


Figure 1 Re-tweet with comment/carbon copy to HW and CCC.

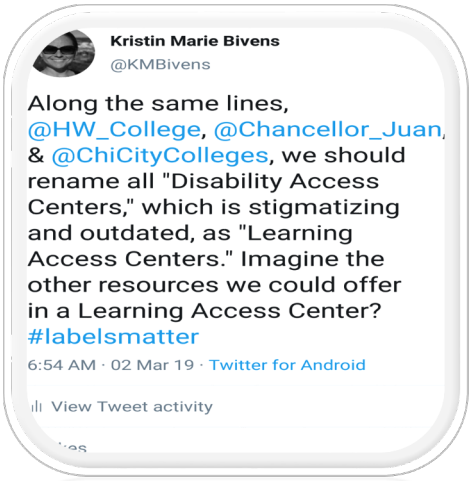


Figure 2 Tweet to HW, the Chancellor, and CCC regarding re-naming the DAC.

In Figure 1, the user Carissa Dufree tweeted that changing the label from "at risk" to "high priority" student shifts the framework or "mindset" by using a positive label. Along the same lines, in Figure 2, I suggested we change the name of the Disability Access Center, which is stigmatizing and outdated, to the Learning Access Center, wondering what other kinds of resources (and students) we could welcome there.

By renaming the DAC the Learning Access Center, it is likely a stigma would be removed, more students would be welcome, and we could update our terminology/label. Furthermore, entering the doors of the Learning Access Center would be no different than entering the doors of HW--an institution committed to learning and access.

What Can We Learn About Learning From Our World Languages Online Courses? (Sequel)

Yev Lapik, Spring 2019 Online Assessment Coordinator

In the Fall 2018 issue of Assessment Times [1] Jen Asimow informed the HWC community that, based on the results of the 2016 "Survey of Student Perceptions of Online Learning" [2], we can begin to look more closely at learning units where students reported statistically stronger perceptions of their online learning.

One such unit was the World Languages program. That finding brought about a question of what we can learn from these online world language courses that can be adapted or included in other online classes (Is it course design? Connection to the instructors? Textbook and associated materials? Something else?). Jen was working closely with the members of World Languages (WL) department (particularly Gabriela Cambiasso and Andrew Aquino-Cutcher) to tease out the important aspects of the online WL courses.

As a result, Jen created a 14-question survey (with additional opportunities for students to comment) and made it available to all students in OL introductory French and Spanish courses offered in Fall 2018. The total number of students enrolled in the above described sections was 113 (19 students in the only section of OL French 101 and 94 students in four OL sections of Spanish 101). The WL Survey was administered online, and we received 12 responses. While the response number for Fall 2018 was low, it does represent 10.6% of all students in the category and we proceeded with a preliminary exploratory analysis of data, with the intention of re-administering the WL Survey at the end of Spring 2019 semester to get more respondents. Highlights of the survey results are presented below:

1. WL Course Representation

OL French 101 students participated in the WL Survey more actively: while they represented only ~17% of WL OL introductory course students, they did constitute ~33% of the survey

respondents.

2. Reasons behind Taking the WL Course Online

The WL Survey shared only one question with the original HWC 2016 Survey of Student Perceptions of OL learning (2): "Why are you taking this course online?" The answers to this question were comparable, in spite of a big difference in sample size: "personal time constraints" and "work schedule" representing the majority of reasons behind taking the course online.

3. Vista Supersite

Working with the WL faculty, Jen found out that all the introductory OL WL courses (French and Spanish) HWC is offering are using an online learning platform called "Vista Supersite" (from the publisher Vista Higher Learning). The platform includes a variety of features: interactive grammar and vocabulary practice, online tutorials, peer chats, media assignments, communication tasks, etc. Thus, a good portion of the questions in the WL Survey were targeting various elements of the Vista Supersite to pinpoint student preferences. (Note: All following percentages are approximate due to rounding.)

a. Ease of navigation

A majority of students (83%) indicated that ease of navigation of the site is important or very important for their learning.

75% of students found Vista Supersite "very easy" or "somewhat easy" to navigate, the remaining 25% found it "somewhat difficult" to navigate.

b. Course/Content organization

Over 90 % of students stated that Course/Content organization is important or very important for their learning.

83% of students found Vista Supersite to be "very organized" or "somewhat organized;"

The remaining 17% found it "somewhat disorganized."

c. Course elements students perceive to be important

There were no obvious consistencies in student perceptions of most elements of Vista Supersite, but a couple features were preferred (Quizzes, Animated tutorials, Flashcards) while “Partner Chat” was more widely disliked.

4. Frequency of Course Access

Over 80% of students were of the opinion that frequent OL course access is important for their learning. About 50% of students reported that they accessed their OL course 4 or more times per week while the remaining 50% accessed it 2 to 3 times per week.

5. Course Interactivity

a. Course design and peer interaction

About 67% of students reported that the design of their online WL course did NOT support a strong engagement with their classmates.

b. Course design and interaction with instructor

There was no consensus among students on this topic: 42% of students reported that the current course design supports their interaction with instructor; 33% reported that it does not, and 25 % of students were neutral.

c. Interactive course elements

There were no obvious consistencies in student opinions on whether Synchronous sessions (e.g. Bb Collaborate) supported their learning. Almost 60% of students reported that instructor feedback had a positive effect on their learning, unlike peer feedback, OL discussions or group projects.

6. Future OL WL Course-Taking Plans and Overall Satisfaction

58% of student reported that they would take another HWC OL WL course using the current format and design, 17% indicated that they would not, and 25% responded "maybe" and provided some additional explanations.

Conclusion:

Fall 2018 OL WL Survey results suggest the hypothesis that the higher level of OL WL student satisfaction is likely due to various aspects of Vista Supersite platform (navigation, organization, and such components as Quizzes, Animated tutorials, and Flashcards), and, to a smaller degree, instructors’ feedback. More respondents need to be assessed to better explore this hypothesis.

Links:

1. http://www.ccc.edu/colleges/washington/departments/Documents/HWCAC/Newsletter/HWCAC%20-%20Assessment%20Times%20-%202018%2011.pdf

2. http://www.ccc.edu/colleges/washington/departments/Documents/HWCAC/Online%20Assessment/HWCAC%20-%20Online%20Assessment%20-%202017%20Report%20Student%20Perceptions.pdf

Does Assessment Spark Joy? Is it a Waste of Time?

Exploring Strong Feelings Around Assessment

Erica McCormack, Vice-Chair of Unit Level Assessment

Assessment is not a new term in higher education, yet as a word, it continues to elicit a range of reactions from faculty, administrators, and students. For some (here's looking at you, Carrie Nepstad), it might immediately and obviously "spark joy" in a way that would make Marie Kondo proud; for others, the sparks that fly around their experiences with assessment are of another sort entirely.

Confusion, frustration, and fear continue to shape many interactions around assessment in higher education. Even though assessment is not a new activity, both the label and the process have been misapplied, which has had the effect of making many people skeptical, resistant, and just plain angry about it, or at least about what they fear it might be.

Articles like "Assessment Is an Enormous Waste of Time" regularly feature in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and other publications. And there are plenty of reasons to be skeptical about particular assessment efforts. After all, around the country, many institutions of higher learning use their regional accreditor's mandate to assess as an excuse to impose work that purports to be an assessment process but is often neither assessment nor much of a process. When evaluation of faculty and students masquerades as assessment, it does real damage. This is why the HWCAC has maintained as a core component of its identity a rigid line between assessment of student learning (which is what we do) and evaluation of faculty (which is what we never do).

My perspective as a faculty member at HWC and a member of the HWC Assessment Committee since 2012 is that our school community, through dedicated leadership from faculty and staff as well as administrative support, has managed to focus on and protect assessment as a process, allowing that process to thrive. That concerted effort continues to pay off, not only in supporting our recent HLC reaccreditation and inspiring other accolades, but also in offering a meaningful process through which faculty members' real questions about student learning can be investigated and discussed.

Articles that are critical of assessment often point to the fact that the reports they generate may not have much of statistical significance to report. However, even when the product reveals less positive data about student learning than we faculty would hope to see, that does not mean that the process of assessment has been a waste. Do some assessments turn out to be wastes of time? Absolutely (usually due to a flaw in the tool or the administration of the assessment itself). But from my perspective, what we learn from those particular failures helps ensure that the larger framework of assessment is strengthened.

One of the main strengths of HWC's work in assessment is precisely that we are not overly fixated on a particular product. Our work has always highlighted the cyclical nature of the assessment process. Phrases like "Closing the Loop," which refers to the vital step of taking actions that we think may improve student learning based on what we've learned from the previous iterations of the assessment cycle, allude to this.

Some of the major successes around assessment at HWC relate to our commitment to continue to frame assessment as a six-stage, ongoing process, rather than something that we "do" and then "have done." Assessment work, particularly through the Unit-Level liaisons in each of the ten academic departments on campus, has contributed to ever-increasing conversations and work among faculty members in which student learning is the main focus. Without investing in the process of assessment, those conversations and the work around them tend to get pushed farther down on overwhelmed faculty members' to-do lists as if those queries were luxury items rather than central to our mission.

Thus far, 25 faculty members on campus have served as a Unit-Level Liaison between their department and the HWCAC. If you think you may be interested in exploring this role in the future, please consider attending some HWCAC meetings (every Wednesday from 3-4pm in room 1046) and reaching out to me (emccormack@ccc.edu) or one of the other officers of the committee. Join us as we ask questions about student learning and work to find ways to investigate them. Engaging in this process is a lot of things—challenging, fun, and sometimes silly—but a waste of time, it is not. You may even find that it sparks some joy.

On the Slippery Slope of Heresy: The Verb "Understand"

Jeffrey Swigart, Chair

Student learning outcomes are supposed to begin with an action verb describing something measurable, and a set of outcomes are supposed to include a range of lower-order and higher-order verbs from Bloom's Taxonomy. For example, a lower-order outcome in a statistics class may be to "calculate the standard deviation of a data sample," while a higher-order outcome may be to "create a visualization of a data sample." The standard deviation calculation is a lower, more mechanical task, while the creation of a visualization requires higher critical thinking and creativity. Both outcomes are measurable, even if in different ways. The calculation can be easily measured for correctness, and the effectiveness of the visualization can be measured according to a rubric.

Common wisdom has held that the verb "understand" is both

too unmeasurable and too lower-order to be used in outcomes. For example, how would one measure whether students "understand the concept of standard deviation"? Sure, we can measure how well students apply the concept, but what does pure “understanding” look like?

Yet Bonni Stachowiak and Laura Gogia (2017, October 12) challenge this assumption in the Teaching in Higher Ed Podcast. They wonder if understanding might actually be one of the highest levels of learning that students only achieve after much work in lower-level tasks such as calculation and creation. And even if understanding is hard to measure, perhaps measurability does not have to be the primary goal of all outcomes. Perhaps it is just as important to instill passion in students to seek deep, nebulous, unmeasurable understanding. Stachiowiak and Gogia certainly care about measurement, but they seem to care much more about student passion.

The Busyness Girl Blog (2018) defends the verb “understand” in a different way by defending its measurability. The author gives the example of understanding a certain type of mathematical equation and how it relates to its graph. There are at least eight characteristics of the graph that students should be able to analyze, but the author claims that it is better for a list outcomes to simply include a single “understand” outcome for this topic rather than to list all of the smaller subset outcomes. The instructor can measure the “understand” outcome by asking students about any number of the many characteristics of these graphs. Yet the focus must remain on the big picture, otherwise it becomes too easy to lead students down a single path of predictable, robotic learning. We give students room to “explore the space and demonstrate what they know” (para. 7).

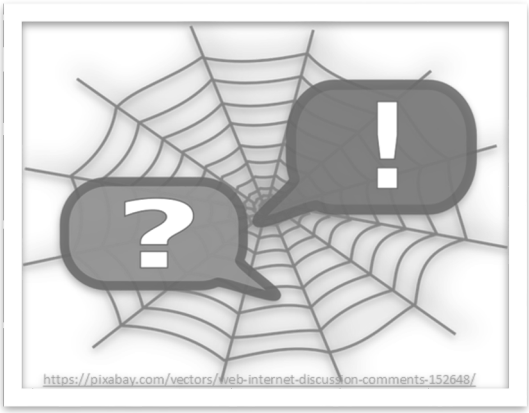
I like this idea of having space to learn. The verbs we use for learning outcomes should open up this space rather than narrowing it to predictability. Most importantly, all of this will likely lead to fuller, more passionate learning, while still hopefully being measurable.

References:

Busyness Girl Blog. (2018). Understand in learning objectives – it’s the forest, not the trees. Retrieved from

http://busynessgirl.com/understand-in-learning-objectives-its-the-forest/

Stachowiak, B., & Gogia, L. (2017, October 12). 21st century learning objectives [Audio podcast]. *Teaching in Higher Ed Podcast.* Retrieved from https://teachinginhighered.com/podcast/21st-century-learning-objectives/#transcriptcontainer



Notes on Online Discussions

Yev Lapik, Spring 2019 Online Assessment Coordinator

Introduction to Online Assessment

While our established Online Learning Coordinator Jen Asimow is working magic on her sabbatical project, I am filling the position this semester.

Being very new to online (OL) assessment, I started out with educating myself on the topic. One of the most important things I have learned so far is that the purpose of OL assessment is not to compare student learning between OL and face-to-face (F2F) modalities, as tempting as it might be, but to assess student learning outcome (SLO) attainment in online courses.

One of the approaches to OL assessment includes collection and analysis of student perceptions of learning OL. It is noteworthy that student perceptions of OL learning environment strongly correlates with student learning [1]!

As for learning OL vs. F2F, a number of meta-analyses show no significant difference between these two modalities [2, 3]. Interestingly, it's the individual comparative studies that frequently show contradictory results, [2] but when they are combined in large meta-analysis studies, the results even each other out.

OL Discussions and Recommendations of the 2016 HWC Online Survey

As Spring 2019 OL Assessment Coordinator, I looked into the results of the “Survey of Student Perceptions of Learning in Online Courses,” conducted by Jen Asimow and the HWC Office of Online Learning in 2016 and, particularly, the recommendations generated based on the results of the survey [4]. Both of the OL courses that I teach are discussion-based by design, and it caught my attention that two out of the four "Interactive Recommendations" of the OL Survey were focused on OL discussions:

- "Instructors should manage discussion board by facili-

tating the conversations, and ensuring accuracy between students."

- "Instructors should consider the number of discussion board forums and the length of responses required so it is not too cumbersome for students."

With the support of the HWC Assessment Committee, I did some literature search on the subject of OL discussions to see if I could shed some additional (and, hopefully, practical) light on the topic of OL discussions for our instructors. Below are the highlights of that inquiry.

OL Discussions and Learning Theory

From a theoretical standpoint, OL discussions hold great potential as a tool for establishing learning communities engaged in authentic learning. The idea of 'authenticity' in an educational context can be difficult to substantiate but usually implies a more meaningful real-life learning [5].

The concept of "authentic discussion" has direct links to the principles of constructivism, whereby the individual's engagement with new ideas is based on their prior knowledge and beliefs, rather than the result of mere information transmission [6].

Although educators are still trying to understand the role of interactivity in knowledge construction and its relationships to learning outcomes, interactivity in online learning communities can be viewed as a socio-constructivist process [7], where discussion participants are co-constructing the knowledge rather than simply exchanging the information. As such, authenticity can manifest itself in OL discussions as an opportunity for students to demonstrate acceptance of multiple perspectives, as an atmosphere of respect and support, and as a practice of generating ideas and taking intellectual risks in a group environment.

Teaching Presence in OL Discussions

It's ideal for an online course to become a community of inquiry where teaching presence together with student social and cognitive presence come together to foster meaningful learning [8]. As a former Biology AOC (Academic Online Coordinator), I am known to complain about low instructor participation in OL discussions, which is quite congruent with the recommendations of the 2016 HWC OL Survey that "instructors should manage discussion board by facilitating the conversations, and ensuring accuracy between students" [4].

When I turned to published literature on the topic, I realized there is little research to support the notion that a specific required number of instructor's posts results in optimal student outcomes [8]. To my great surprise, I even found data on negative correlations between the frequency of instructor postings and student postings, as well as between the length of the discussion thread and instructor participation [9]):

- the more prominent the instructor was in discussion, the less prominent the students were
- the more engaged the instructor was in discussion, the shorter the student discussion threads were

More so, additional studies report that the frequency of instructors' posts does not appear to have any significant impact on students' perceptions of the quality of their teacher, their course, their perception of learning or their actual achievement [8].

At the same time, students' sense of community appears to be higher in instructor-facilitated discussions (compared to peer-facilitated discussions), and certain studies indicate that students do want their instructor to take upon the role of OL discussion facilitator as a content expert qualified to resolve disputes, to keep discussion focused, and to motivate student contributions [8].

Another function of teaching presence is to help students to transition from social to cognitive presence [10]. Without explicit instructor's guidance, students tend to engage in "serial monologues" (sharing experiences and opinions without connecting to other contributions) [10] and/or in mere generation of information summaries.

Types of Instructors' Comments in OL Discussions

While the frequency of instructors' posts does not seem to have any significant impact on students' perceptions of the quality of their teacher, course, perception of their learning or their actual achievement, contents of an instructor's posts can be significantly related to students' satisfaction and achievement outcomes. Some types of posts can have more value to students than others. For example, instructor posts that attempt to correct students who fell short of guidelines can have a negative impact on students' perceptions of their learning. Thus, it may be more beneficial to reserve critical evaluation and redirection directly with the student (e.g. via email) and not in the public venue of a discussion forum [8].

On the other hand, instructors who attempt to establish teaching presence by responding frequently to students with posts of acknowledgement, affirmation, praise, and summary do not necessarily achieve any positive correlation between these types of communications and student satisfaction and achievements [8]. Thus, we educators should steer our efforts away from direct corrections, criticism, and praise to other types of discussion interaction and engagement practices that can make a difference.

Researchers found that the contents of the instructors' discussion posts can include a variety of interactions, such as instructional, encouraging, questioning, conversational, acknowledging, evaluative, and operational [8], for example:

Instructional posts provide new information to the discussion, clarify confusions, or share resources to improve understanding.

Conversational posts are conversational in nature, are not explicitly intended to improve student learning, but provide a glimpse of instructors' personality and elaborate on

students' ideas without providing instruction.

The majority of the professors' posts analyzed in a recent study [8], were "instructional" (~37%) and did improve students' perceptions of their learning. Surprisingly, posts that were "conversational" (~8% of all types of instructor posts in the study) improved not only students' perceptions of instructor and course quality, but also their actual academic achievement! No other statistically significant correlations among the types of instructor comments (encouraging, questioning, acknowledging, evaluative, or operational) and student satisfaction and performance were uncovered [8]. It appears that students like their OL instructors to manifest the social aspects of teaching presence, and appreciate and benefit from their efforts of creating and maintaining a comfortable online learning atmosphere.

Claims for OL Discussions

Most studies and literature surveys [7, 11, 12, 13] offer a conclusion that OL discussions are potentially or very valuable as a support for teaching.

OL discussions:

- being asynchronous, can be more structured and cohesive than F2F discussions
- being asynchronous, can allow for more time to reflect on and respond to the topic
- being asynchronous, can allow for a higher flow of interaction and a more thoughtful building upon previous comments than "turn-taking" F2F communication
- can offer opportunities for more "group-centered" as opposed to "authority-centered" modes of learning
- can demonstrate relatively high levels of participation and learner presence
- can allow students to interact with a wider circle of classmates and to be a more active discussion participant (a "disinhibition" phenomena)
- can allow students to outperform those participating only in F2F discussions
- can promote student writing performance
- can allow students to learn collaborative and constructive interactions
- can allow participants to experience and appreciate peer social support
- can allow students to experience challenging arguments that can lead to higher levels of interaction

Potential downsides of OL Discussions

While, in theory, OL discussions present an excellent tool for authentic learning, in practice, there are a number of challenges that can come up when implementing this tool [7, 11, 12, personal observations).

OL discussions:

- frequently do not meet expectations for student engagement
- demonstrate a widely varied level of student participation with just a few students dominating the discussion
- do not always stimulate students to build on the comments of one another
- do not always prompt the participants to give more than just direct answers or summaries
- do not always allow participants to stay focused, as the threaded structure can lead off-topic
- usually do not show correlation between participation and the quality of the contribution
- are difficult to grade, as LMS grading modes show work of an individual student out of the context of her participation in various discussion threads

Recommendations for OL Discussions [8, 10, 11, 12]

Design recommendations

OL discussions should:

- have manageable content, and structure corresponding to the intended SLOs
- have reasonable deadlines that allow time for reflection and participation
- provide clear participation requirements (length, content expectations, timeliness)
- be focused on students creating meaning and confirming understanding
- focus on quality of participant interaction
- weave together social, cognitive and teaching presence factors
- provide more reflection opportunities, since learners tended to summarize rather than analyze in their OL posts
- have structure that prevents student engagement in "serial monologues"
- be interesting/useful for the majority of students since intrinsic motivation influences the participants' level of interaction

Teaching Presence recommendations:

- teacher presence should be obvious to participants but not overly prominent; it's crucial to ensure that discussion does not become teacher-centered
- instructor comments should be more of "instructional" and "conversational" type (see the "Types of Instructors' Comments in OL Discussions" section above)
- instructors should encourage peer suggestions and divergence
- instructors should use assessment rubrics to encouraged students' participation and achievement

Instructors should be aware that:

- student-teacher interactions tend to dominate at the beginning of the discussion but decrease over the course of the discussion, being replaced by student-student interactions
- participation level can vary widely among students, and a few discussion participants tend to dominate the discussion

- peer interactions with supportive messages frequently prevail in OL discussions
- some discussion initiations ("main posts") will receive no peer response, and this is no reflection on the quality of student contribution
- there is a positive relationship between the level of a participant's interaction and the time spent on a discussion

OL Discussions: SLOs, Assessment and a Connection to Group Projects

The term "online discussion" usually implies internet-mediated asynchronous threaded discussion among students taking an OL course. Just like in-class assignments, OL discussions can be incorporated in a course in a variety of ways. Three main types of OL discussions were described [11]:

1. **Open Forums:** students are free to contribute "as and when." Participation is not assessed. Volunteer participants can rotate through being a moderator.
2. **Loosely structured forums:** students are expected to complete certain tasks on an individual basis and post task results for group discussion. Learners can be given course credits for participation.
3. **Cooperative or collaborative task-based forums:** students are expected to work in small teams in order to complete an assignment and communicate via OL forum.

Note that the 3rd type, "Cooperative or collaborative task-based forums," reaches out to the type of OL activity that is not typically associated with OL discussions - OL group projects. Interestingly, one of the Design Recommendations of the 2016 HWC OL Survey states: "Reconsider the use of group projects as a natural and regular part of course design. More conversation is needed around the topic of group projects and learning" [4]; this recommendation came about largely from an overwhelmingly critical feedback from OL students regarding the OL group projects. There is a common set of complaints among my students regarding group projects: it's hard to coordinate communication and meeting time, and few group members tend to have to "carry" the project for the whole group. Thus, it looks like OL discussions utilized for communication within a team working on a particular group assignment can serve as a useful tool for asynchronous group work, especially if it gets to be assessed as a part of a group project.

The purpose of any formalized educational experience is to structure the educational process to achieve the predefined SLOs; therefore, when designing the course, we should focus on the types of activities that are more likely to help students achieve the course SLOs. We can judge the effectiveness of a particular activity, whether it is an OL discussion, a group project or something else, by assessing collaborative and individual aspects of student learning.

Limitations

I would like to note that OL discussion studies are prevalent in areas of education and are underrepresented in the area of math and sciences. Many of the studies cited here had variations due to size, geography, discipline, academic level (high school to graduate level) and others.

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From the HWCAC Secretary:

Yev Lapik

In Spring 2019, the HWCAC underwent some pre-planned leadership restructuring: our beloved committee chair, Carrie Nepstad, stepped down to pursue her educational goals (but she mercifully agreed to stay on as the committees' Vice-Chair of Gen Ed Assessment). Jeffrey Swigart, a 7-year HWCAC veteran, took over the Chair position. Michael Heathfield, one of the HWCAC legends, returned back after a long hiatus during which he ushered our community to its reaccreditation, this time as a Vice-Chair of Co-curricular Assessment. The committee is down to just one Research Analyst, Fernando Miranda-Mendoza, who is courageously analyzing ALL the HWCAC assessment data! (And there's a lot!)

Just a few weeks ago, we received stellar feedback from the HLC regarding our work stating that "HWC's efforts in the area of assessment of student learning are commendable," and "HWC has put in a yeoman's effort to improve its assessment process since its comprehensive review in 1998." And while a few of us had to giggle and look up the phrase "yeoman's effort," and others were debating the finer differences between yeomen and beefeaters, everybody was extremely proud of the committee's work and of HWC's dedication to support us.

This semester, the HWCAC, as usual, can boast about its popularity - 18 members, on average, have been attending the weekly meetings on Wednesdays from 3:00 to 4:00 pm in room 1046. Each meeting features snacks provided by the committee members on a rotating schedule. So far, this semester we had a variety of treats, from delicious cookies, cupcakes to candy and Chinese moon cakes, so if you feel peckish on Wednesday afternoons and up for some discussion about student learning, you are more than welcome to join us!

HWC Assessment Committee General Info

Website: http://www.ccc.edu/hwcassessment/

Chair: Jeffrey Swigart of the Math department at jswigart@ccc.edu or 312-553-3062.

Membership: We are always looking for new faculty, students and staff to join in our exciting work. We meet every Wednesday from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m. in room 1046. All are welcome to join us. The Committee Charge states that there can only be two voting members from each department, but we are happy to involve as many people in our work as possible. If you want to discuss what this might involve or ask further questions, please contact our committee chair at the contact info shown below.

Assessment Times: We produce this publication each fall and spring. You can find an archive of older editions on our website.

Our Mascots: The question mark represents our asking of questions about student learning. The infinity symbol represents our continual cycle of assessment, including collecting data, analyzing the data, supporting evidence-based change, and then starting again by asking more questions.

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