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Pulling it Together: Using Integrative Assignments as Empirical Direct Measures of Student Learning for Learning Community Program Assessment

Abstract

This article outlines a systematic and manageable method for learning community program assessment based on collecting empirical direct measures of student learning. Developed at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi where all full-time, first-year students are in learning communities, the approach ties integrative assignment design to a rubric for grading the assignment developed by teams at a planning retreat each semester. The rubric specifies competencies from each class included in the assignment as well as a criterion for success of earning an overall grade of B or better (80 points or higher). The authors describe an advocacy letter assignment designed for a political science course in state and local government, a first-year composition course, and a first-year seminar. An appendix includes the assignment along with the grading rubric as well as the method used by administrators to aggregate data across all learning communities.

Cover Page Footnote

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Pulling It Together: Using Integrative Assignments as Empirical Direct Measures of Student Learning for Learning Community Program Assessment

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There is a growing body of literature with methodologies for assessing student learning in learning communities (Boix-Mansilla, 2008/2009; Burg, Klages, & Sokolski, 2008/2009; Dunlap & Sult, 2008/2009; Graziano-King & Kahn, 2008/2009; Hoerner, Goldfine, Buddie, Collins, Holler, Prochaska, & Wooten, 2008/2009; Lardner & Malnarich, 2008/2009; Pettitt & Muga, 2008/2009; Saunders, Brumm, Brooke, Mickelson, & Freeman, 2008/2009). A recent focus of this assessment has been in the area of integrative work. For accreditation and various accountability systems, academic programs are increasingly being asked to demonstrate evidence of student learning. At Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi (A&M–Corpus Christi), the First-Year Learning Communities Program (FYLCP) was assigned the task of developing a direct measure of student learning for integrative learning. Evidence was needed for program improvement, and reaffirmation for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

The challenge was finding a method to systematically collect direct measures of student learning from across all of the learning communities (LCs) in quantifiable and manageable method for program assessment. This article demonstrates the use of frameworks developed by Malnarich and Lardner (2003) and Smith (2004) for assessment and integrative assignments to develop a systematic method for measuring student learning with direct empirical measures at the classroom level that is then aggregated across LCs as evidence for program assessment. Thus, this work demonstrates a practice for LC program assessment that is well grounded in the LC literature.

The Process

Texas A&M–Corpus Christi has approximately 9,500 students and is a Hispanic-Serving Institution. All full-time, first-year students enroll in LCs both semesters during their first-year. LC teams usually

contain of a mix of faculty members, instructors, adjuncts, and graduate teaching assistants who work together throughout the semester to ensure that their courses are more than superficially connected. Each member of the team is responsible for keeping up with the other courses and for relating assignments, content, and activities in his or her course to the assignments, content, and activities in the other LC courses. Obviously, constant communication—in the form of weekly face-to-face meetings and via regular e-mail—is vital.

These connections are first facilitated through the planning retreats arranged for the LCs before the semester even begins. The fall planning retreats are held in late July or early August, while the spring planning retreats occur sometime during the winter break. When they were first piloted in fall 2007, the planning retreats were 3 hours long and mainly consisted of creating common LC goals and policies. Since then, the retreats have been extended to a day and a half and now include time for team building, reflections over the previous year, discussions about the nature of integration, and a step-by-step heuristic that leads to the creation of the integration assignment.

The heuristic used at the planning retreats is based on the work of national leaders of LC practice (Malnarich & Lardner, 2003; Smith, 2004). Each team member receives a stack of sticky notes and is asked to write down the goals that they have for their individual course, one goal per sticky note. These goals can be generic (i.e., develop critical thinking skills) or specific (i.e., learn APA formatting).

After the team members have had ample time to consider their goals for the upcoming semester, the teams work together to make connections between the goals from each of their courses, and the connections are physically represented by the creations of stacks of similarly themed sticky notes. The next step involves the development of LC themes or questions that address and connect the goals that the team collectively decides are the most significant. At the end of what is usually an intense and productive discussion, teams are ready to design an integration assignment for their students.

The integration assignment that results from this heuristic is truly “integrated” in that it requires students to demonstrate knowledge or skills reflecting their learning in each of the LC courses. This assignment provides the team with a direct student learning outcome of integration. One of the final group tasks at the planning retreat is to determine what success means for the newly created assignment. For example, the team might decide that in order for the LC to claim success at truly integrating the courses, 80% of

¹ For more information on the program, visit uccp.tamucc.edu

the students must earn an 80 or above on the integration assignment.

Throughout the semester, the LC team members work together to develop a detailed description for the integration assignment and to refine a shared rubric. All of the instructors in the LC are expected to devote class time to assist students in some aspect of the creation of the assignment. Finally, to further emphasize the connections between the courses, the final grade on this assignment is weighted heavily in all of the LC courses.

An example of integration between three LC courses is the advocacy letter assignment, which was developed for the fall 2008 State and Local Government (POLS 2306), First-Year Composition (ENGL 1301), and First-Year Seminar (UCCP 1101) learning community. This assignment asked students to write a letter to a business, government official, or organization addressing topics related to the learning community theme of “oil and politics.” This was of high interest because of the popular presidential election and the increasing national focus on how energy and petroleum products were being used. For example, there was a renewed emphasis on reusable shopping bags. A student who was opposed to a grocery store charging for plastic bags would write a letter to a government official requesting a law or political pressure that the store not charge for plastic bags.

In order to write an effective letter, the students need to know the genre of an advocacy letter. Of course, any effective letter also needs evidence obtained from research. These are all topics addressed in ENGL 1301. The seminar emphasizes viewing issues from multiple perspectives, and the letter assignment requires students to do this. In addition, UCCP 1101 emphasizes clear, logical, informed arguments. Finally, POLS 2306 addresses the role of government in the solution to the problem. The assignment is thus integrated because material from each course is used, and integrated, to develop the advocacy letter. The successful letter is the product of their successful integration.

The LC teaching team developed a rubric for grading the assignment that identified the contributions from each course to the overall assignment. The rubric specified the competencies from each class that were included in the assignment. The criterion for success established by the LC team was that the students earn an overall grade of B or better (80 points or higher). The assignment and grading rubric are included in the Appendix.

Each LC team designates someone to collect and submit the integrative data. The data are simply the number of students who met the criteria for success on the assignment (B or better in the POLS 2306 LC, for example) as well as the number of students who attempted the assignment. The FYLCP administrators then aggregate this data across all the LCs.

Using the number of students who successfully met the integrative criteria and the number of students who attempted the assignment, the percentage of students who met the criteria can be calculated for each LC and for the program. The individual LC and LC program data is shared with the LC teaching teams so they can reflect on the data and make revisions. The leadership of the FYLCP also uses the data and shares it with interested constituencies, including faculty and administration.

Evidence from the 2008–2009 academic year indicates 87% of students in the FYLCP attempting the integrative assignments were successful (results are in the Appendix). Based on the findings, one LC team set a goal to increase student participation with the assignments. Another team decided to create an integrative assignment that is more challenging. As a program, the goal was set to connect the integrative assignment data to a survey of FYLCP students.

Discussion

This process is transferable to other LC programs. All LC programs can develop program goals and design assignments for students to demonstrate that they have achieved the goals. The key is to have a designated individual assigned to coordinate the effort and to collect, analyze, and distribute the program results.

In conclusion, the practice described in this article is the implementation of integrative assignments within learning communities as a means of collecting empirical direct measures of student learning, which are then pulled together as part of program assessment. The practice was used successfully in the 2008–2009 academic year, and the findings were used for program assessment. The cycle is continuing in 2009–2010.

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Appendix **Example of Integrated Assignment**

Integrated Assignment:

Letter to [insert company/organization/government official here]

In this integrated assignment, you are being asked to write a letter to a company, organization, or government official based on what you've learned about oil and politics thus far. In the assignment, you can argue that the organization or government official is not doing enough to address environmental issues and suggest that they do more, or you can oppose the practices of a company or organization. You will be expected to send this letter to your chosen representative.

For Example:

You may choose to write a letter to the Save the Plastic Bag Coalition arguing against their practice of suing cities that are banning plastic bags.

-or-

You may choose to write a letter to a government official about the lack of recycling facilities located on the island.

Requirements:

- In the body of your letter make it clear what you know about the topic, what you know about your organization's involvement with that issue, what you want, and what you will do politically to get it.
(If you use any information that you have taken from another source, you will need to acknowledge your source(s). Make sure that if you use sources they are scholarly sources and don't come from Web sites like iknoweverything.com.)
- You will be most effective if you come right out and politely, but clearly, tell your organization that if they want your support they should consider what you are asking them to do about that particular issue. This makes it very certain where you stand and that you are serious.
- Request a reply to your letter. Sign and date the letter (don't actually send the letter).

Why an Integrated Assignment?

A goal of your learning community (Triad L) is to use the disciplinary knowledge from each discipline to better understand an issue. By completing this assignment, you are using an interdisciplinary understanding. You are applying the genre of letter writing and effectively using sources (goals of composition), you are applying civic engagement and your own personal values (goals of the seminar), and, finally, you will approach this assignment with your new understanding of different roles in the political system (goals of political science).

Due Tuesday, November 25, in your seminar class.

Integrated Assignment Rubric

Composition Requirements (30 points) _____

- The claim of your argument is clearly stated (5 points).
- The reason for your claim is clearly stated (5 points).
- You provide ample evidence for the claim that you make (5 points).
- You use only credible sources (5 points).
- Your letter offers a specific and reasonably viable solution (5 points).
- Your letter is in business format (5 points).

Seminar Requirements (30 points) _____

- Your argument is informed, clear, and logical (15 points).
- Your argument contains multiple perspectives (i.e., the consumer's perspective, the government's perspective, the business's perspective) (15 points).

Political Science Requirements (30 points) _____

- You must prove accurate understanding of the government's role in the solution to the problem.
 - 30 points: Solid understanding of a governmental institution, political actor, or role of government.
 - 26 points: Good, but slightly inaccurate or incomplete grasp of governmental institution or comprehension of the role of government.
 - 23 points: Partially correct portrayal of role. Student does not fully comprehend the role of government.
 - 20 points: Just barely displays an accurate understanding of the role for government or political institution.
 - 0: Failure to include an understanding or use of a completely inaccurate understanding of the governmental institution or role of government.

Presentation (10 points) _____

- The letter is a polished document that integrates the material.

Total Grade _____

**Integrated Assignment Aggregate Data
2008–2009 Academic Year**

		Semester	# Meeting the criteria	# Not meeting the criteria	% Success
Tetrad D	Political Science/ History	fall	176	27	87
Tetrad S & T	Biology/ Chemistry	fall	235	18	93
Triad E	History	fall	191	37	84
Triad K	History	fall	191	30	86
Triad L	Political Science	fall	142	22	87
Triad B	Sociology	fall	105	23	82
Triad F	Political Science	spring	140	43	77
Triad L	Political Science	spring	490	17	97
Triad M	History	spring	87	30	74
Triad K	History	spring	171	32	84
Triad I	Psychology	spring	148	18	89
Tetrad S & T	Biology/ Chemistry	spring	134	20	87
Totals			1040	157	87