Designing Assignments in a Learning Systems Paradigm

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Overview

NILOA Assignment Charrettes and Resources

Learning System Paradigm
- Consensus-based
- Alignment
- Learner-centered
- Communication

Applying the Paradigm to Assignment Design

Discussion and next steps
NILOA’s mission is to discover and disseminate effective use of assessment data to strengthen undergraduate education and support institutions in their assessment efforts.

- SURVEYS
- WEB SCANS
- CASE STUDIES
- FOCUS GROUPS
- OCCASIONAL PAPERS
- WEBSITE
- RESOURCES
- NEWSLETTER
- PRESENTATIONS
- TRANSPARENCY FRAMEWORK
- FEATURED WEBSITES
- ACCREDITATION RESOURCES
- ASSESSMENT EVENT CALENDAR
- ASSESSMENT NEWS
- MEASURING QUALITY INVENTORY
- POLICY ANALYSIS
- ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN
- DEGREE QUALIFICATIONS PROFILE
- TUNING
- LEARNING SYSTEM

www.learningoutcomesassessment.org
Welcome to NILOA

Our August newsletter featuring NILOA updates, news, and upcoming conferences and programs is now available.

In the News | Archive

Keeping Up with Competency
Tue, Sep 29, 2015 - 08:00 am
Paul Fain in Inside Higher Education

Competency-based education continues to expand in practice and conversations. College officials even plan to get together at a meeting called CEExchange to further discuss the benefits and usefulness of competency-based education. This is a timely meeting given that the meaning of competency-based education is still evolving.

Produce Thinkers, Not Docile Workers
Tue, Sep 29, 2015 - 08:00 am
David Gooblar in Vitae

David Gooblar made a passionate case for faculty members to embrace student-centered learning rather than credential-centered learning, reflecting on the insights of professor Cathy Davidson from the Graduate Center at the University of New York.

The New College Scorecard
Tue, Sep 29, 2015 - 08:00 am
Michael Stratford in Inside Higher Education

Have you seen the new college information website called the College Scorecard? Visitors to the website can see information about how much federal loans former students at college and universities have been able to pay back in addition to achievement data and students average incomes after graduation.
Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education

George D. Kuh, Stanley O. Ikenberry, Natasha A. Jankowski, Timothy Reese Cain, Peter T. Ewell, Pat Hutchings, Jillian Kinzie

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Brand
What’s a “charrette”?

"Charrette" (Fr.) means a small cart. Because architecture students once deposited their assignments in it as the cart was rolled through the studio, architects now use the word to refer to an intense creative effort in a limited time period.
(a) In the tradition of the “atelier,” architecture students progress through the curriculum in the company of their mentors and peers. This approach offers an interesting model for an integrated education.

(b) The tradition rests on the assumption that much of your learning will come from one another.
What we did (and will do again)

Invited faculty applications (with draft assignment)

Brought the group together for a day-long meeting

Worked in 5-6 person, facilitated “charrettes”
Assignment-Design Charrette Process:

In groups of 5, each person/team will have an opportunity to share their assignment and receive suggestions and feedback from the group. In order for everyone to have an opportunity to give and receive feedback, we will use a timed carousel process. There will be five rounds. You will be a “presenter” for one round and a “participant” for the other four rounds.

Each round is 25 minutes.

Introduce assignment (5 min):
Presenters will introduce the assignment and provide background information such as: in what course the assignment is used, at what point in the course, pertinent information about the students in the course (majors vs. non-majors), what they find most challenging about the assignment, how it builds on earlier work and/or prepares students for more advanced work in later courses (or success beyond graduation), your experience with the assignment to date, how you hope to strengthen it, and what kinds of feedback and suggestions you would like from others.

Listeners: jot down thoughts and questions but please do not interrupt the presenter, let them have their full five minutes.

Discussion (15 min):
Listeners will respond to what they have heard, taking turns asking questions, sharing thoughts, feedback, etc. The purpose of the discussion is to help your colleague strengthen their assignment so please be constructive and collegial. Also, please mind the time and allow each participant the opportunity to contribute to the discussion. Discussion should address the four questions on the feedback sheet.

Presenters: listen carefully and respond to the inquiries. Think about alignment, but also think creatively about possible solutions.

Feedback (5 min):
Everyone: Based on the discussion, use the feedback form to give the presenter written feedback and suggestions. The presenter can use this time to write down notes about the assignment, based on what they just heard, along with outlining next steps for revision or additional feedback.
Small Group Process

25-30 minute segments per person/assignment

- Present assignment briefly—which outcomes, what course, which students, how does it work....

- Discussion with group (focus on questions on feedback form)

- Save 5 minutes for written feedback

- Breath

- Start again...

- Debrief at end
Assignment-Design Charrette Feedback Sheet:

Assignment________________________________________

Comments From____________________________________

1. What outcomes do you think students will be able to demonstrate with this assignment?

2. What are the main strengths of this assignment for assessing the identified outcomes?

3. Thinking about the assignment from the point of view of students, what questions or suggestions do you have?

4. Other suggestions and possibilities – especially in response to the author’s questions about improving the assignment?
Impact

76% of participants said “it helped me more clearly see my assignment through my students’ eyes.

59%: I’m more aware of aligning my assignments with desired institutional outcomes.

38%: helped to lead or facilitate an event about assignment design on their campus
DQP Assignment Library

The purpose of this website is to provide a searchable online library of collegiate-level course assignments in a wide variety of academic disciplines that link to one or more proficiencies in the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP).

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) has been working with groups of faculty from various institutions to revise and strengthen assignment alignment to specific proficiencies. The assignments and commentaries here are works in progress, generously shared by faculty members from a wide range of fields and institutional types committed to advancing and documenting student learning. To learn more about the assignment library initiative click here. To see a list of advisors to the project click here.

This Assignment Library allows you to:

- Browse and adapt assignments to fit your needs
- Submit an assignment to the library
- Consult a resource
- Give us feedback!

The Peer Review Process

The materials in the DQP Assignment Library have gone through a three-stage review process. The first stage of review is undertaken by the NILOA project team, which makes decisions about whether to accept the submission or not. Those selected for a second stage of review are then shared with three to six faculty peers, typically from the same or related fields, who have experience with assignment design; their role is to provide written feedback and suggestions for revision. After making revisions, authors resubmit their materials to NILOA, where they pass through a final review to make sure that all required elements are included, and minor copy editing as needed. The finished materials are then published to the site. We invite viewers to comment on and ask questions about assignments.

We recognize, however, that assignment design is an iterative process, and we expect that many of the materials posted here will undergo further revision and improvement. Authors are encouraged to submit updated versions of their materials and to continue reporting how the assignment is being used in their classrooms.

NEW! A second installment in our “featured assignment” collection from Mary Kay Jordan-Fleming at Mount St. Joseph University focuses on integrative learning in a capstone course. Featured assignments include video clips, student work samples, and reflective commentary from colleagues in various settings. Read here to learn more.
A Way Forward

A question we routinely receive regarding working with faculty on assignment design is how to get started. What if assignments have never been shared and faculty are reluctant to do so? What if there isn’t a safe space to talk about assignments? What if we can’t start conversations with assignments and need another way in? Fortunately, Karen Ford from the University of Sheffield addresses these issues by providing a means to initiate conversations with faculty about assessment ranging from the value and purpose of learning outcomes, assessments, and rubrics to issues of assignment design. In her interactive presentation, “Let’s Face It”, Karen outlines a faculty development workshop that is backward designed to create a space to openly discuss issues of teaching, learning, and assignment design. The collaborative workshop allows faculty to make connections between assessment practices in specific courses with the learning outcomes of a program and institution. The approach raises faculty assessment literacy by engaging them in assessing an assignment as a group, working their way through uncovering the value of learning outcomes, assignment prompts, and rubrics. The work is trans-disciplinary in that it takes an issue-based approach to problem solving as opposed to a disciplinary lens. Karen (2016) states in a paper accompanying a presentation given at the Assessment in Higher Education Seminar on the activity:

  I suspect we are all so busy getting on with the business of assessment, that taking the time to scrutinize what we collectively know about assessment and how it is applied in practice beyond our sphere is perhaps something we feel unable to justify. After all, assessment is taking place and students are graduating, so an assumption is easily made that all those involved in the assessment process are cognizant of underlying principles and processes and explicitly operating in light of them. I am not convinced this assumption is a sound one.

Karen designed the faculty-led activity to use a staged approach, immersing participants into the grading an assignment with intentional issues built into its design, providing a safe space by using an example already developed. She writes of the experience working with faculty from different universities, colleges, and disciplines that the conversations were candid, frank, practice-based, and created space for dialogue. We are delighted to share her resource as part of the assignment toolkit and hope you find it as useful as the faculty who have participated in the activities.

Natasha Jankowski
Director, NILOA

Think-Pair-Share

What role do assignments play in the assessment work you see on your campus?

What help do faculty (and professional staff) need in developing assignments as assessment tools?
Assignments as a way in

Assignment

Scaffolding Learning

Learning Outcomes

Evaluative Criteria
How assignments connect
Program View

General Education

Major

Assignment

Scaffolding Learning

Learning Outcomes

Evaluative Criteria
Connections

Implications for transcripts, career development, and pathways
CURRENT STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION
Assignments can help students make sense of it all?

Our institutions tend not to be organized or function towards intentional alignment of student learning experiences. Students learn everywhere, but the institutional organization tends to require students to take the jumble of experiences and organize them for themselves.

ASSIGNMENTS CAN HELP STUDENTS TO MAKE SENSE OF IT ALL AND INTEGRATE THEIR LEARNING.
The Learning Systems Paradigm changes the way we conceptualize the organization of the institution, how we work within that organization, and whom we involve in that work. It encourages:

- Working collaboratively across typical divisions
- Intentionally aligning learning experiences
- Addressing needs of the institution’s particular students
- Building transparency for all participants and stakeholders
The Learning Systems Paradigm

A framework for supporting faculty, staff, and student efforts to create greater coherence among the various learning experiences at a given institution—and among institutions.

DESIGNING ASSIGNMENTS IN THE PARADIGM CAN TURN THEM INTO TOOLS FOR INTENTIONAL COHERENCE
Consensus-based

Through faculty-led conversations, reflections, and explorations with employers, alumni, and others, a shared understanding and consensus is reached on learning outcomes. This shared understanding serves as the foundation for revising outcomes for enhanced clarity and designing educational experiences.
Consensus & Assignment Design

- Create a shared understanding of the collective outcomes toward which we strive and how assignments facilitate that
- Moves towards the collective nature of our work
- Promotes a collaborative approach to conceptualizing design using resources such as librarians, student support staff, etc.
- Consensus does not require absolute agreement, but shared understanding
- Encourages consensus around where students struggle and demonstrate strength
- Includes different voices in the design
- Moves around language barriers by moving to “doing”
Questions about Consensus

- Should the conversations take place within a specific discipline or department, or should there be cross-disciplinary discussions?

- Who should be involved in conversations around assignment design? How are librarians, student affairs, students, centers for teaching and learning, and faculty involved?

- In this assignment, are we excluding demonstrations of learning that may occur in other areas of the learning environment?

- Is there agreement on what it takes to demonstrate the learning outcomes in the form of an assignment?
Think-Pair-Share

Which of these questions seems most relevant to the work that may already be happening on your campus?

Which questions might be most stimulating to discussions around assignment design on your campus?
Alignment

Using the agreed upon learning outcomes, faculty and staff align educational experiences throughout the institution for intentional integration, coherence, and fostering of multiple pathways. Alignment involves curriculum mapping, scaffolding, assignment design, mapping of career pathways, and co-curricular engagement.
Alignment & Assignment Design

- Three components require alignment in the design of assignments: outcomes, evaluative criteria, and the assignment.
- Tight alignment among these three components mitigates poor validity.
- Need to be able to clearly articulate how we think relationships hold among these components.
- Need to be clear about how the assignment is aligned with and elicits demonstration of degree-level learning.
- Without clear understanding of those relationships, identifying what we need to revise becomes more difficult.
Alignment

- How does the assignment align with learning outcomes? Evaluative Criteria? Learning activities?
- How do our assignments and activities elicit demonstrations of a specific learning outcome?
- How do we know that we have mapped our assignment to rubric criteria? How have we mapped our assignment approaches across our curriculum?
Think-Pair-Share

Which of these questions seems most relevant to the work that may already be happening on your campus?

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Learner-Centered

The educational system reorganizes educational experiences around *all* students and their learning. Taking a student view includes consideration of issues of equity, learning-focused transfer, alternative delivery models, flexibility in offerings, integration of prior-learning assessment, ensuring stackable credentials, and building multiple pathways.
Learner-Centeredness & Assignments

- Students can learn through the completion of the assignment task if constructed in a way to encourage deep learning.
- Active involvement of students in assignment design ensures student voice, clarity, and engagement.
- Student experiences raise questions about assignment timing.
- Learner-centered assignments include time for meaningful feedback and opportunities for students to engage with that feedback.
- Implications for equity and assessment.
Learner-Centeredness

- In what ways have learners been involved or consulted in the assignment process? How are they seeing the assignment differently from faculty?

- Is it one assignment for all students, or are there multiple paths to demonstrate learning in ways that are culturally responsive and mindful of our learners?

- What assumptions do we have regarding our students as learners that are implemented in our assignments? Are they accurate?

- Where do learners think they have demonstrated attainment of learning outcomes and do they connect with our own perceptions?
Think-Pair-Share

Which of these questions seems most relevant to the work that may already be happening on your campus?

Which questions might be most stimulating to discussions around assignment design on your campus?
Communication and collaboration with students and other audiences through transparent discussions around the outcomes and educational system works to make the implicit explicit. Communication involves exploration and integration with advising, alternative transcripts, admissions, and employers.
Communication & Assignments

- Students benefit when instructors communicate to students that they are being assessed, but that is rarely communicated to them.

- Because students have the hardest time with transferring knowledge, they require opportunities to reflect and need opportunities to apply their learning over time.

- Students require clear explication of assignments, including purpose, the task, and criteria for evaluation.

- Rubrics provide explicit descriptions of what (more and less) successful demonstrations of learning look like.

- Annotated examples of student demonstrations of learning enable students to better see what they are being encouraged to do.
Communication

- Does the assignment identify clearly the skills to be practiced and the content knowledge to be gained by completing the assignment?

- How might the assignment prompt students to use these skills and knowledge in their life beyond the context of the course or college?

- Does the assignment clearly explain the task and how to do it, such as identifying recommended steps or common mistakes?

- Do students have access to the rubric to help them determine if they are on the right track or doing what is expected?
Think-Pair-Share

Which of these questions seems most relevant to the work that may already be happening on your campus?

Which questions might be most stimulating to discussions around assignment design on your campus?
Discussion

Thank you!

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www.degreekprofile.org
www.learningoutcomesassessment.org