



Assignment Design at Palo Alto College

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Submitted by Julie McDevitt, Coordinator of Measurement & Evaluation - February 9, 2018

Palo Alto College is a community college in San Antonio, Texas, with a student enrollment of about 10,000. The College assesses student proficiency in the six Texas core curriculum core objectives of Communication, Critical Thinking, Empirical & Quantitative Skills, Personal Responsibility, Social Responsibility, and Teamwork through course-embedded “key assignments” and the subsequent rating of the resulting student work with rubrics developed by a College committee.

Yearly assessment results have indicated a significant percentage of student work that could not be rated fairly because the assignment did not prompt the students to demonstrate proficiency in one or more of the rubric criteria. To help support faculty in the design of assignments that are better-aligned to the rubrics, the College has offered seven “key assignment design working groups” modeled after the NILOA charrette process and using materials from the first assignment design toolkit. To further facilitate this improvement effort, the College decided to shift the assessment calendar back by one semester, so rather than collecting and rating student work in the fall, it will be collected this spring. The schedule change allowed faculty one semester to improve key assignments through participation in a working group.

The first group took place on June 19, 20, and 21, 2017, and was organized and facilitated by the College’s academic assessment coordinator. The group included six cross-disciplinary faculty volunteers from the areas of Math, Music, Accounting, Mexican-American Studies, Philosophy, and Biology, who met for two hours each day for three days and followed the NILOA process for participant groups: Assignment author sets up discussion (5 min); Q&A, feedback, discussion (15 min); Written feedback (5 min). Each author used feedback from the session to revise the assignment; the revised assignments were shared with the assessment coordinator and founded the College’s “key assignment” library. The library will be a valuable resource to all faculty, including adjuncts, who comprise 50% of our total faculty population. It will be a key component in addressing the difficulty the College departments experience with adequately informing and preparing adjunct faculty, who include off-campus dual credit instructors, with assessment of these institutional learning outcomes.

The second group occurred June 28-29, 2017, and was organized and facilitated by the LEAP Texas organization. Ten cross-disciplinary faculty members from various colleges and universities in San Antonio formed the design group; three of the ten participants were faculty from our College. The group focused on the Social Responsibility core objective and the assignments and student artifacts will become part of a larger statewide LEAP Texas research project, the results of which will be available later in 2018.

Three additional groups were offered by the College’s assessment coordinator (Sept. 8, Oct. 6, and Oct. 13, 2017). The format was changed slightly from the first June group based on discussion and feedback from the participants. It was determined that a one-day, three-hour

commitment was easier to schedule for busy faculty, so the groups met from 9:00 – 12:00. In that time frame and continuing to follow the same discussion protocol, it was possible to invite four faculty members to the design table with one assignment each. The faculty continued to be volunteers from multiple disciplines. An additional change included the composition of the groups: staff were invited to join the conversation in order to enrich the feedback given to faculty through additional perspectives. The staff included librarians, advisors, tutoring leads, the service learning coordinator, a student services data analyst, and a student services administrator.

The two most recent groups that took place on January 11, 2018, included several important changes that the College believes further enhanced the experience for participants. Prior faculty participants became the group facilitators, which shifted ownership of the process from the assessment coordinator to the faculty. Also, one student participated in each group. This important perspective was very well received by faculty, who valued the student feedback on their assignments. Finally, two faculty members participated from San Antonio College, which is one of five sister schools, along with Palo Alto College, that form the Alamo Community Colleges district. The addition of our sister college colleagues expands collegiality and collaboration between the campuses.

To date, 28 faculty members (of approximately 120 full time faculty) have participated in a design group, as well as ten staff members, one administrator, and two students; three faculty members have served as facilitators. Nearly all of the reflective feedback received from participants has been positive. Faculty not only mentioned the positive insights that the cross-disciplinary and cross-department and -college group members offered that will lead to the heightened quality and refinement of their assignments, but also the value of the deep discussion to their pedagogy, course curriculum and course design, in general. Many also expressed the more system-level understanding they walked away from the group with due to the commonalities that came to light among the disciplines, and how this awareness will ultimately translate to a more cohesive experience for students.

The one negative feedback comment came from a faculty member whose group was unable to deliver satisfactory design ideas for a specific aspect of the assignment: teamwork in an online setting. The positive outcome of this comment is that it uncovered this common challenge that many instructors face and now the College is researching ways to support faculty around the issue. Another growing challenge faced by the assessment coordinator has been the recruitment of faculty participants. The College feels it is essential to maintain the voluntary nature of participation, and the hope is that as participation grows, the positive experiences will be shared with others, prompting them to join a group. This chain reaction effect is already being seen. An additional strategy is to be more intentional about the faculty we target, for example, those whose assignments were deemed unassessable, or those disciplines in which there is no known key assignment. Finally, it has also been suggested that a discipline- or department-specific group of faculty may be effective, as well, and could prompt more faculty to get involved.

The academic assessment coordinator intends to continue organizing and offering the key assignment design working groups on a more regular basis throughout the academic year. The focus of the groups this year has been on the core objectives of Communication and Teamwork because these are the two objectives that will be assessed this spring. Future groups will most likely focus on additional core objectives. Also, the academic assessment and faculty development offices are initiating a partnership and plan to offer sessions to further support faculty in designing quality assignments. The assessment office will continue to maintain and grow the “key assignment” library, as well.

Small Group Discussion Protocol
Key Assignment Design Working Group

In small groups, each faculty will have an opportunity to share his/her 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 one round for each faculty assignment. Faculty will be a “presenter” for one round and a “participant” for the other rounds.

Each round is 25 minutes.

Introduce Assignment (5 min):

Presenter (faculty) 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), how it aligns with the course, program and institutional learning outcomes, 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):

The other Participants (faculty, staff, students) 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 his/her 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.

Brief break before next round (5 min)

Assignment Introduction (5 minutes)
Key Assignment Design Working Group

Please provide the following information to the group about your assignment. The time allocation for this description is approximately 5 minutes.

1. Course location within the curriculum.
2. Student demographics (level, major/non-major, etc.).
3. Student motivation for taking the course.
4. Ways in which the assignment fits into the course content.
5. Proficiencies being assessed (to include Gen Ed core objectives).
6. Your experience with using the assignment.
7. Challenges students face with the assignment.
8. Questions for colleagues.

Assignment Design Worksheet: Communication

Course	
Assignment Title	
Developers	
Assignment ID	(to be assigned)

Criterion	How does this assignment align to this rubric
Content and Purpose. The student uses relevant content that conveys understanding	
Organization. The student uses disciplinary conventions for organizing and presenting content.	
Tools. The student uses communication tools appropriately and skillfully for academic and professional contexts	

Reflections
Key Assignment Design Working Group

1. What was this process like for you? What ideas are you taking away?
2. What insights do you have about effective assignments?
3. What will you do next and what would help you do that?
4. How can others be brought into this work or benefit from it? What is most important to share?
5. How can we entice and excite faculty to think differently about key assignments and assessment?
6. What are your perceptions / what did you gain from cross-disciplinary discussion?
7. What are your ideas for future sessions around assignment design and/or assessment?

Key Assignment Design Working Groups

Julie McDevitt, Coordinator of Measurement & Evaluation
Palo Alto College – January 2018

National Institute for
Learning Outcomes Assessment
Making Learning Outcomes Usable & Transparent

Agenda

Welcome and Introductions (10 min)

Session Details (20 min)

- Goals, Resources

- Context, Rationale

- Deliverables

- Rules of Engagement

Small Group Discussion Protocol (\approx 30 min each round, 2 hours)

Welcome and Introductions

- Faculty
- Staff
- Students
- Facilitator(s)

Goals

1. Improve overall quality of assignment.
2. Better align assignment to Institutional Learning Outcome(s).

Goals

Quality, Aligned Assignment

Quality, Fully Assessable Artifact

More Valid Results;
More Accurate Measure of Student Proficiency

Qualitative (Qualitative Assignments) Instructions

While the assignments are meant to assess individual learning experiences and your own growth, they are also designed to help you develop the communication and professional skills and abilities. The following instructions are meant to help you succeed in your professional assignments with which you are currently working or will be working in the future.

All students should observe the following directions:

1. An updated resume that reflects your learning experiences to date.
2. A brief description and description of the assignment that you are currently working on or will be working on in the future.
3. A list of the assignments that you are currently working on or will be working on in the future.
4. A list of the assignments that you are currently working on or will be working on in the future.

After three weeks, you will be able to see that you have made significant progress in your learning experiences. You will also be able to see that you have made significant progress in your learning experiences.

RUBRIC TASK:

A+

(Student's Surname) 1

Name _____
Subject _____
Professor _____
Date _____

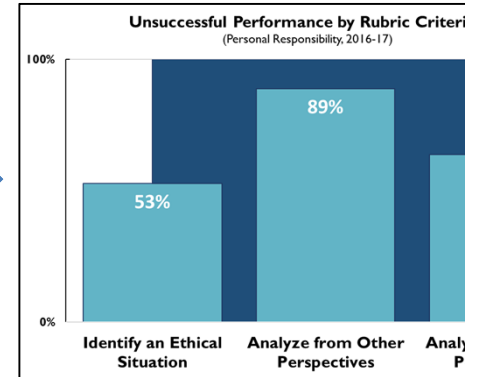
JFK and the Evolution of Mass Media

One of the most popular American political icons known all over the world is John F. Kennedy. John F. Kennedy, also more popularly known with his initials "JFK," experienced greater popularity because of his assassination that took his life. Perhaps to some people, this is just the time wherein mass media and the life of JFK has significantly intertwined, since the mass media has gobbled up every single detail of this unfortunate incident involving one of the most popular and one of the most charismatic leader the United States has ever had. But in his short life which is nonetheless well lived, JFK has affected many different aspects of life, and that includes the mass media, its practices and important perspectives in this industry which made him a significant influence in the evolution of mass media and mass communication.

Mass media was starting to become a significant part of the world. Charismatic political leaders in a way that it is producing useful change which showed affinity for the actions of JFK. JFK made significant contributions to the analysis and the growth of the industry.

RUBRIC TASK:

A+



Resources

- PAC Academic Assessment web site:
 - PAC Home Page
 - > Faculty & Staff
 - > Academic Assessment
 - > Resources

Context

NILOA's Initiative

- National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA)
- Tracking campus assessment work, NILOA noted rising interest in assignment design and use
- Invited faculty to apply to join assignment design groups
- These groups came together for a day of conversation and collaboration about their assignments
- 5-6 person facilitated “charrettes”

Context

NILOA's Initiative

- www.assignmentlibrary.org
- 50-some assignments
- Revised and improved with feedback
- Contributed from a wide range of fields and institutional types
- Online, indexed, and searchable
- With a scholarly citation
- *Stimulated assignment work on campuses*

Rationale

Why Focus on Assignments?

1. Creating good assignments is challenging intellectual and creative work that should be visible, recognized, and rewarded.
2. Bring high-level learning outcomes to life.
3. Foster learning and document/assess it.
4. Send powerful signals to all stakeholders about what matters.
5. Lead to more valid assessment of learning outcomes.
6. Group work develops shared language among participants and cross-disciplinary awareness, understanding & alignment.

Other thoughts? Why did you “sign up?”

Rationale

What's in it for You?

- A chance to refine an assignment
- Get ideas to take back to your classes
- Meet thoughtful colleagues
- Contribute to the work of others
- Develop a model key assignment for assessment
- Be part of a larger development:
 - NILOA's Assignment Library Initiative
 - Assignment work on our campus, disciplinary associations, other state & national initiatives

Deliverables

1. Written reflection of group experience
2. Revise and submit assignment (end of Feb)
3. Complete *Assignment Design Worksheet* (end of Feb)
4. Implement revised assignment (spring 2018)
5. Meet to debrief (spring 2018)

Reflections

1. What was this process like for you? What ideas are you taking away?
2. What insights do you have about effective assignments?
3. What will you do next and what would help you do that?
4. How can others be brought into this work or benefit from it? What is most important to share?
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Rules of Engagement

- We're all in this together!
- Take turns
- Listen actively
- Focus on being helpful rather than critical
- Be respectful of each other & each other's work
- Others?

Group Discussion Protocol

1. Participants review assignment – 5 minutes
2. Author introduces assignment – 5 minutes
3. Group discussion / Q&A—15-20 minutes
4. Written feedback—5 minutes
5. [Break—5 minutes]

Folder Contents

1. Small Group Discussion Protocol
 2. Assignment Introduction
 3. ILO Rubrics (all 6)
 4. sample *Assignment Design Worksheet*
 5. **Article:** Winkelmes, M., Bernacki, M., Butler, J., Zochowski, M., Golanics, J., & Weavil, K. H. (2016). A Teaching Intervention that Increases Underserved College Students' Success. *Peer Review, Winter/Spring*, 31-36. Retrieved January 3, 2018.
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6. Assignments
 7. Feedback Sheets

Adjourn

