Does Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes Make a Difference? One Department’s Experience  
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At the beginning of the spring term, 2003 the psychology department at Irvine Valley College met to begin discussing student learning outcomes. This brief presentation describes our department’s progress since that very first meeting. The experience so far has been productive and satisfying. Moreover, the effort is leading to improved teaching and learning. We’re also modifying our curriculum to better serve our students. (For this presentation, I will spare you the details about our SLOs and assessment findings, but if you want them please go to the California Assessment Institute website and look under Strand 3 to download the PowerPoint that has that information. The URL is http://cai.cc.ca.us/SLOworkshops/Strand2/Psyslos_ivc_CVC.ppt. After providing an overview of the process we have followed, I will list the results of our effort to date.

Overview – At the first meeting, we reviewed accreditation standard two, our psychology course outlines, the college mission statement, and the American Psychological Association’s guidelines which describe what a student having a BA in psychology ought to know and be able to do as a consequence of his or her coursework. We decided to begin with the introductory course, since so many students take this popular course and it is their only exposure to psychology. We identified six learning outcomes and decided to focus on just the top three. The top three learning outcomes chosen were:

1. Explain why psychology is a science and not a pseudo-science.
2. Describe the major theoretical perspectives in psychology.
3. Describe the basic structure and functioning of the brain and nervous system.

After some thought, these outcomes were reworded to more closely conform to the outcome statement structure recommended by Bill Scroggins (in a prior listserv presentation). For example, the current wording of SLO #1 is as follows:

When asked to explain why psychology is a science, 90% of students who complete Introductory Psychology will cite some fundamental tools and concepts used in the science of psychology (e.g., control groups, systematic and objective gathering of evidence, independent and dependent variables), and the public and self-correcting nature of psychological research (e.g., replication, peer-reviewed journal publications), and how this differs from the pseudo-sciences. The minimum performance criterion will be two examples of fundamental tools and/or concepts, two examples of pseudo-sciences, and mention of the public process of psychological research.

To assess student learning of these outcomes, all instructors teaching the introductory course agreed to administer the same 30 objective questions and three short answer essay questions to their students during the final exam. The department met again at the start of the spring term (2004) to ponder the findings. We found that our students did poorly on our top learning outcome, but that they performed fairly well on the remaining two outcomes. We decided to improve the prompt for the first learning outcome and repeat this assessment. We also decided to expand the number of multiple choice questions to cover all of our top six outcomes. Finally, we developed an electronic (web-based) assessment instrument and began collecting assessment data using a pre and post test design. In early June we will analyze the data. In preparation for our next department meeting on learning outcomes, instructors have developed a draft set of outcomes for our physiological psychology course and our introductory statistics course. At our next meeting, we also
will try to develop outcomes for the psychology major. This concludes the background section. Next I’ll describe the impact of our learning outcomes work.

Teaching and learning outcomes – Different teaching strategies have been developed for teaching SLO #1 in the introductory psychology course. Preliminary data from four classes taught during the subsequent summer and fall sessions show that 80% of the students now perform acceptably on this assessment (up considerably from 11% during our first semester doing SLO assessment). This demonstrates that our new teaching strategies are working. We are, however, considering developing more sophisticated assessment strategies (e.g., case study scenarios) to gauge if students are able to apply their learning of this key outcome.

Changes in the psychology faculty – The meetings have encouraged our faculty, fulltime and adjunct alike, to focus on the main reason that we chose to become teachers: teaching and learning. Our meetings have been both productive and upbeat. Collectively we’ve become more sophisticated about assessing student learning. We now see, for example, the benefit of pre and post testing students – which is especially important given the varied level of preparation that students bring to our classes. We are learning the benefits of rubrics and rubric development for scoring essay answers, and student performances and products. One of our instructors is now using rubrics to evaluate and grade student participation in his online courses (e.g., discussion board and chat room participation). We are becoming increasingly experienced and conversant with assessment terminology (e.g., authentic assessment, rubrics, cross-rater reliability). Generally there is a greater focus and interest in student learning. We are working on more efficient, less obtrusive ways to gather assessment data (e.g., electronic assessment, embedded assessment). There is a growing interest among departmental faculty in conducting systematic assessment of different instructional strategies based upon the science of learning (See How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School by the National Research Council, 2000).

In conclusion, our work in developing and assessing student learning outcomes has been both positive and productive. We are enthusiastic about this work and look forward to expanding it to other courses and to the program level. The reader may conclude that our success so far is due to having a supportive campus culture, but the true reason is we decided to get busy. As a faculty group we found it fairly simple to agree on what we want our student to know. Figuring out ways to meaningfully and efficiently assess this learning has been a little more challenging. Making instructional changes in response to indications of unsatisfactory learning has been fairly easy so far.

As a consequence of identifying and assessing learning outcomes, substantive improvements in teaching and learning are beginning to occur. I suspect that our experience is not very different from any other department that’s taking the learning outcomes challenge seriously.