

Overview

The Division of Student Affairs has identified seven (7) Student Learning Outcomes (<http://studentaffairs.campuscms.ucmerced.edu/node/26>). We believe that intentional programming by Student Affairs professionals and active engagement in the co-curriculum provides students ample opportunity to master these outcomes by graduation. In 2014-15, Student Affairs staff designed assessment projects to measure the Student Learning Outcome of Effective Communication.

Learning Outcome

In fall, 2014, seven sections of University Studies 10 committed to measuring student growth in written communication through the weekly reflective writing assignments. The project's learning outcomes were

- 80% of participants will achieve "Proficient" (general college level) written reflective work that illustrates intentional engagement with the prompt, makes insightful observations relating their own experiences to course concepts, and effectively uses convincing examples.
- 100% will demonstrate improvement on their written reflection papers from their initial two scores to their final two scores.

Methods

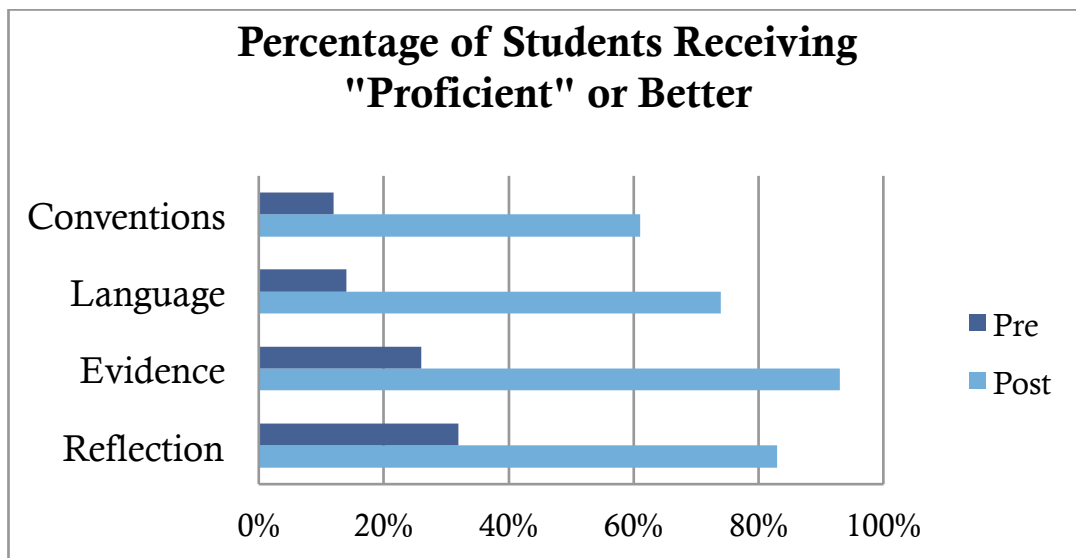
A rubric was adapted from the National Council of Teachers of English, measuring four main writing skills, with standards ranging from Highly Proficient, Proficient, to Nearing Proficiency and Unacceptable. Any paper receiving a score of Unacceptable on any criterion was returned for resubmission. The four criteria are:

1. Depth of Reflection
2. Use of Textual Evidence
3. Language Use
4. Writing Conventions

Direct Evidence of Learning

Students receiving a score of "Proficient" or better are presented in the table below, showing that students improved in every category from the beginning to the end of the semester. The greatest gains were realized in "Use of Textual Evidence," moving from 26% to 93% of students scoring "Proficient" over the course of the term. Only 21% of the students scored "Proficient" in Writing Conventions at the beginning, but 61% reached "Proficient" by the end of the term. This skill showed the least amount gained and the lowest initial score.

Language Use was also initially low with only 14% of the students scoring "Proficient" but ten weeks later, 74% of the students were considered "Proficient," the second largest gain (60%) in these results. Initially, 32% of students scored "Proficient" in Depth of Reflection, but by the end of the term, 82% scored "Proficient." Thus, the learning outcome of 80% of the students reaching "proficiency" was realized in half of the criteria (Use of Textual Evidence and Depth of Reflection) but impressive gains were demonstrated in all four criteria from the start to the end the term.



Compiling results of the sections (N=82), the scores for the first two assignments were summed and compared to the sums of the last two assignments. In this comparison, 96% of the participants improved from their first to their last assignment scores. Averaging the scores from the initial assignments, and from the later assignments, the mean score of the initial score was 12.5, compared to the mean score of 17.5 for the final score.

Students' Perceptions of Learning

Instructors from one section noted surprising results from their final writing assignment. Using the same prompt as in previous semesters when the Reflective Writing rubric was not implemented, the final papers included remarks about writing. The comments clustered into four categories, listed below with exemplars from the students' papers.

1. Marked Improvement: "I've seen massive improvements in my writing."
2. Role of Feedback: "As I received poor feedback on my entries, I began to rethink my writing strategies."
3. Skills Gained: "An important factor I can identify is the new ability to write openly about my past experiences."
4. Impact on Other Courses: "I know that without the comments and revisions, I would not have done as well in my other classes."

Conclusions & Recommendations

The Division of Student Affairs is committed to measuring our co-curricular student learning outcomes (SLOs). This project demonstrated the promise of rubric-based feedback for improving student ability to engage in meaningful written reflection, and in doing so, advance our students' learning with respect to our Divisional Effective Communication SLO. While instructors found the rubric labor-intensive, the noteworthy improvement in students' reflective writing skills (figure above) suggests students benefitted greatly from our time investment. We would, however, like to see at least 80% of the students scoring "Proficient" on all four criteria, instead of only two. It is recommended that, knowing UCM students struggle with writing, as student affairs professionals, we strive to not only create opportunities to provide students the chance to write but also provide meaningful feedback to help students improve upon their writing abilities. It appears that working on writing in one context might improve it in another, thus having feedback and practice writing in the co-curriculum could well serve our students in the classroom and beyond UC Merced.