

Introduction:

We have assigned all seminar students in the “new” sections of seminar a “reflective essay” in which students are asked to (from the accepted proposal) “reflect upon and assess their own process of learning. Students will write a self-reflection essay that assesses their progress in the main learning outcomes of 1) Shared Inquiry, 2) Critical Thinking and 3) Written & Oral Communication. This self-assessment should involve some form of explicit dialogue between the student and the professor, either in conferences or in writing. The final version of the essay will be placed in a student essays database and be available to their future Seminar instructors.”

Explanation of the choice of thematic analysis:

We designed this essay to serve as a resource for evidence about student learning. By analyzing the essay using qualitative thematic analysis, we can aggregate student experiences to the extent that we find shared experiences among students taking seminar course. Themes are patterns that exist across a set of data (such as a set of essays), and they speak to experience of particular phenomena. We can note students’ shared experiences, while either keeping sight of individual student progress, or can examine student learning across the institution. Themes are usually associated with specific research questions.

Explanation of the research questions or areas:

We are asking three kinds of questions, and these questions map on to three standard areas of assessment. **The first, is the assessment of the individual student and of students’ engagement with shared inquiry across their years of attendance at Saint Mary’s:** *What do students think they are learning, and how do they understand their own learning?* At this stage of assessment, we do not have data complete enough to say anything about individual or institutional learning because the four new seminars have not finished rolling out into the curriculum.

The second set of questions addresses the **range of student learning and will at least partially project for us how we should understand the developmental aspect of seminar learning.** *How does student learning develop over the four years of seminar?* Particularly now that we have required that it be developmental. Rather than just imposing a rubric from above, we wanted to track what aspects of seminar most students seemed to understand, and through an analysis of this, we hope to construct a rubric for developmental learning in seminar that reflects students experience as well as our aspirations. This report will suggest some directions for the first two stages of the rubric.

The final set of questions addresses **the programmatic level of assessment:** *Does the pedagogical scaffolding that we have designed work? Are the learning outcomes clear and do the modules address the learning outcomes?* We think that by looking at how students use the outcomes in the reflective essay we can assess how useful they are, and in so far as the students show facility with the skills in the modules, we can indirectly assess how useful they are. There are several aspects of the outcomes that suggest some changes be made both to the outcomes and to the ways we have students approach them.

Method Statement: How we collected our data

In August 15, 2013 and January 25 and 29 of 2014 we analyzed 80 seminar 1 essays (August and Jan 29) and 40 seminar 2 essays (Jan 25), using open/emergent coding. Each essay was read by two coders, and the results were compared to produce a list of categories. These categories were compared and combined to produce themes.

- ULO: use of outcomes with no evidence to demonstrate i.e., “my writing has improved over time.” Not “After meeting with a peer who encouraged me to provide evidence for my argument, my writing improved.”
- ULO: challenges of seminar overcome by osmosis or just doing more seminar (passively or through accumulation): i.e., “After a while, I got it.”
- ULO: challenges of seminar overcome by engaging with discussion/writing/reflecting (levels of dimensionality increase as learning deepens) **potential developmental rubric divider**
 1. One-dimensional learning: This describes a cause and effect understanding of a stand-alone action that yielded a stand-alone improvement: “after annotating my texts I was better able to ask questions.”
 2. Multi-dimensional learning: This describes a connected chain of actions and results that bleed into multiple areas of learning. “Once I began asking questions, I noticed that my peers often ignored them. As I listened to what questions they were interested in, I was able to pose better questions, and then I got really good feedback in the answers from my peers. That gave me the courage to use the discussion to hone theses for my papers, and at the same time, I began to enjoy and seek out opportunities to give feedback to my peers’ writing.”

Notes about the learning goals as tools for reflection:

- Some of the learning outcomes, while excellent outcomes, do not serve as the basis for reflective writing. Students sometimes choose to reflect on WO#1, “to recognize and compose readable prose...,” but no essays in the first two batches of seminar two essays seemed to indicate that it was a helpful exercise to reflect on this goal.
- Some of the learning outcomes have some repetition among certain of them: Each set of learning outcomes were written by separate faculty groups, and when considering them together here, we can see the overlaps (and those overlaps are evident in student essays). We might think about revisions that simplify the learning outcomes.
 - SI#2 and WO#4 are the most obvious examples of being about the same thing;
 - CT#4 and SI#1 are also quite similar;
 - CT#3 and WO#3 are also quite similar;
- There are no reading-centered outcomes, despite the fact that the seminar is centered on reading of enduring works of western literature. It is suggested that we revise the seminar specific learning outcomes, “which include reading backward and forward across the timeline to understand thread of conversation” and bring them back before the UEPC.

Conclusions about student metacognition:

From the two coding sessions of seminar 1 essays, the range of student metacognition varies from misunderstanding a given learning outcome to reflecting on it in a way that indicates a transfer of knowledge through several parts of the seminar experience, that is that shows a multi-dimensional process of learning (that is, an understanding of learning that allows a lesson from one area of seminar transfer to other areas of seminar or to outside the seminar). A second kind of rubric that would be possible to create could track the dimensionality of a students’ learning with respect to a learning goal. For example, look at this statement, culled from a student essay:

session of coding to round out the analysis. Nonetheless, here are some preliminary categories from the first round of reading/analysis.

Preliminary Descriptive Categories:

- The reading was much harder in seminar 2 than seminar 1
- Seminar 1 prepared me for seminar 2, except (in some cases) for the difficulty of the reading.
- Students are realizing the importance of listening beyond their own viewpoints.
- Students claim to become better readers.
- Students are challenged, in a good way, by classmates' ideas.

Developmental Categories:

ULO: writing outcomes almost universally were presented with no evidence, or were discussed at the level of goals, not outcomes, i.e. "my shared inquiry improved."

ULO: shared inquiry outcomes were presented with indirect evidence

ULO: quiet students: i.e., a high number of essays showed that students understood that "quiet students" negatively impacted the discussion and showed concern about wanting to help them in.

ULO: Quotation of outcomes is replacing evidence.

Conclusions about seminar 2:

Writing: student reflection on writing is lacking evidence. Is this a function of student emphasis on improving reading?

By the end of seminar 2 students show evidence of thinking deeply about seminar discussion and the process of preparing for discussion; they do not show similar evidence about writing and the writing process. This would suggest that we need to enhance our attention to writing and the writing process.

Technical Suggestions from the Coders:

- The essay coders suggested making a different version of the goals that students would use foster better essays.
- They also suggested that given students more direction in the assignment would foster better essays:
 1. Give students a choice of outcomes, but require they write about at least one which that they feel weak in.
 2. Direct students to one specific topic for the later seminars, but allow flexibility in the others, i.e. in seminar 2, explain the differences for the student between seminar 1 and seminar 2, and also reflect on the difficulty of the readings.

Final Conclusion: We are half-way through the seminar roll-out, and 3/8 of the way through the assessment for the first cycle of seminar courses. We have two potential directions to go for rubrics, and several observations about clarifying the learning outcomes, including trying to add in some of the seminar-specific language that has not been passed by the UEPC about reading outcomes.