

Achieving Course Objectives And Student Learning Outcomes: Seeking Student Feedback On Their Progress

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ABSTRACT

Most postsecondary faculty in the United States include course goals or objectives as key components of their syllabi. In addition to individual course objectives, many institutions have identified institution-wide student learning outcomes (SLOs). This paper describes one faculty member's attempts to elicit feedback from students regarding their growth related to both course objectives and SLOs and provides the results from a course evaluation and a focus group.

Keywords: Assessment; Postsecondary Pedagogy; Student Learning Outcomes; Course Objectives

INTRODUCTION

*M*ost postsecondary faculty in the United States include course goals or objectives as key components of their syllabi. However, faculty members are less likely to state the activities that will be introduced in the course to foster accomplishment of these objectives within the syllabus.

In addition to individual course objectives, many institutions have identified institution-wide student learning outcomes (SLOs) that “clearly state the expected knowledge, skills, attitudes, competencies, and habits of mind that students are expected to acquire at an institution of higher education” (National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, 2012). There are numerous means for collecting evidence of student progress in achieving SLOs at the institutional and programmatic levels (National Institute, 2012). It is less likely that data will be collected at the individual course level because it is not anticipated that students will fully achieve these longer-term goals within the context of a single course or term. This article describes one faculty member’s attempts to elicit feedback from students regarding their growth related to both course objectives and SLOs.

The Course: PsTL 1907W, “Exploring Diversity Through a Popular Culture Lens”

PsTL 1907W is a writing-intensive freshman seminar designed by the instructor. The section described in this paper was taught in spring 2012, which was the second time the Department of Postsecondary Teaching and Learning (PsTL) had the opportunity to offer the course. According to the course syllabus, PsTL 1907W explored

a wide range of topics related to diversity as a social construct in the U.S., including issues of equity and social justice and how social power, prestige, and privilege are afforded to some social groups and not others. The goal of the course is to promote understanding and acceptance of cultural and individual differences and to examine the impact of attitudes and beliefs related to difference on historical and contemporary social dynamics, democratic practices, and institutional stratification in the U.S. We will use popular culture as a lens through which we will view diverse social identities with specific emphasis on race, ethnicity, citizenship, religion, spirituality, gender, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, language, and disability, and examine myths and stereotypes that shape attitudes and behaviors related to difference. We will discuss the role that popular culture can play in perpetuating or deconstructing stereotypes and thus influence how social power, prestige, and privilege are bestowed. Each

student will also have the opportunity to explore one aspect of social identity in greater depth through the final paper and final project.

This is a writing-intensive course. A writing assignment will be due almost every week. We will begin with shorter assignments and work up to longer papers. Longer writing assignments will be graded for grammar, usage, and style, as well as for content and creativity. None of the writing assignments in this course will have “right” or “wrong” answers, but it will be important to provide sound reasoning to support arguments and opinions. Students will receive in advance the specific grading criteria for each writing assignment. (Higbee, 2012, p. 1)

PsTL 1907W met one day per week for 2.5 hours for three credits. The course is an elective, but fulfills both a writing-intensive course requirement and the University of Minnesota Council on Liberal Education (CLE) “Diversity and Social Justice in the U.S.” theme requirement. It is available to first-year students from throughout the University. Further information about the course and the results of the evaluation of the previous course offering are provided elsewhere (Higbee, Goff, & Schultz, 2012).

Course objectives specific to the spring 2012 section of PsTL 1907W included the following:

- Students will practice analyzing artifacts of popular culture (e.g., art, music, poetry, film, theater, dance, television programs, advertisements, fiction, comics, magazine and newspaper articles, electronic media) in a multicultural context and will determine how they contribute to our understanding (or misunderstanding, in some cases) of diversity issues.
- Students will use higher-order thinking skills to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate course materials.
- Students will use knowledge acquired in the course to propose creative solutions to real-life problems.
- Students will further develop their writing skills; they will (a) distinguish between casual or informal writing and academic writing, as well as engaging in creative writing; (b) learn how to recognize and correct common errors in their own writing and how to read standard editorial symbols; (c) cite sources and provide references in a standard style; and (d) revise writing projects using multiple sources of feedback.
- Through the final project and final paper, students will explore an aspect of social identity in depth, including examination of historical and contemporary social dynamics, democratic practices, and institutional stratification in the U.S.
- Students will play a role in facilitating class discussions and will take responsibility for their own learning.
- Students will make oral presentations and share oral critiques with other class members. (Higbee, 2012, p. 2)

University of Minnesota SLOs

The University of Minnesota (2007) has established the following set of SLOs. At the time of receiving a bachelor’s degree, students:

- Can identify, define, and solve problems
- Can locate and critically evaluate information
- Have mastered a body of knowledge and a mode of inquiry
- Understand diverse philosophies and cultures within and across societies
- Can communicate effectively
- Understand the role of creativity, innovation, discovery, and expression across disciplines
- Have acquired skills for effective citizenship and life-long learning

Faculty members are expected to determine which of the seven SLOs will be addressed in each course and to describe the activities intended to facilitate student growth related to each SLO. The faculty member teaching PsTL 1907W identified the following SLOs and related course activities in the syllabus:

- Ability to identify, define, and solve problems: Through readings, reflective writing, and discussion we will consider multiple ways of looking at and resolving issues that impact all citizens of the U.S.

- Ability to locate and evaluate information: The course text concludes with a section on “Evaluating and Documenting Sources”, which is assigned in the first week of class, and the companion website (bedfordstmartins.com/rewriting) includes a wide array of resources. Longer writing assignments will require the appropriate citation of sources and provision of a “Works Cited” or “Reference” page, depending on the citation style used. Students may choose to use Modern Language Association (MLA), American Psychological Association (APA), Chicago, or another style, as long as they are consistent.
- Understand diverse philosophies and cultures in a global society: Although this course will focus on diversity in the U.S., our population is made up of people of diverse heritages. Thus, any conversation about diversity must be considered from global as well as local, regional, and national perspectives, and in our current “information society” events in the U.S. affect the whole world, and vice versa. One of the applicable readings in the course text is “Globalization Versus Americanization” by Andrew Lam.
- Ability to communicate effectively: This course will focus on both written and oral communication. In addition to writing papers with different goals, styles, and intended audiences, students will take responsibility for facilitating their own discussions, whether in dyads and triads, small groups, or with the class as a whole. An entire section of the course text addresses “What Are You Trying to Say: How Language Works.” Students will also read a published journal article on “The Power of Language” authored by the instructor and a student who participated in this freshman seminar in spring 2009.
- Understand the role of creativity, innovation, discovery, and expression in the arts and humanities and in the natural and social sciences: In addition to using artifacts of popular culture (e.g., art, music, poetry, film, theater, dance, television programs, advertisements, fiction, comics, graphic novels, magazine and newspaper articles, electronic media) as a lens for exploring diversity, for some assignments students will have the opportunity to share their reflections through the creative forms of their choice.
- Skills for effective citizenship and life-long learning: Among the most valued skills in the world of work today are the ability to look at problems from multiple perspectives and communicate in a manner that values difference. Development of these skills is central to the goals and objectives of this course. (Higbee, 2012, pp. 1-2)

Thus, activities in PsTL 1907W were created to facilitate first-year students’ development related to six of the seven SLOs—all except SLO 3: “Have mastered a body of knowledge and a mode of inquiry” (University of Minnesota, 2007).

METHOD

At the midpoint of the semester, the 15 students enrolled in PsTL 1907W in spring 2012 were invited to sign up to participate in a focus group at the end of the term; 8 volunteered. One week prior to the end of the semester, a PsTL graduate practicum student and a visiting scholar who had been observing the class convened the focus group immediately after the end of class. Students received a \$10 University Bookstore gift card for their participation. The focus group session was audio recorded and then transcribed by a PsTL graduate student research assistant (GRA). No student identifiers were included in the transcription, which was not turned over to the faculty member until students’ semester course grades had been submitted to the University.

On the last day of class, PsTL 1907W students were asked to respond to an anonymous written course evaluation in addition to the institutions’ survey for the standardized ratings of teaching (SRTs), which are also completed anonymously. These assessment activities were administered by the practicum student after the faculty member had left the room. The SRT survey forms were returned to the PsTL departmental office in a sealed envelope, and from there were sent to the University’s Office of Measurement Services. The course evaluation forms were also returned to the PsTL departmental office, where they were turned over to the GRA for analysis. Again, the results were not shared with the faculty member until students’ semester course grades had been submitted.

COURSE EVALUATION SURVEY RESULTS

Of the 15 students enrolled in the freshman seminar, 14 were present on the last day of class and consented to have their course evaluation responses used for research purposes.

Items Related to University of Minnesota SLOs

The series of items related to SLOs asked, “On a 1 to 10 scale, where 1 = ‘not at all’ and 10 = ‘outstanding,’ please evaluate the extent to which this course accomplished each of the following goals.” Table 1 provides the results for the six University of Minnesota SLOs addressed in the course.

Table 1
Student responses to items related to University of Minnesota student learning outcomes

SLO	N	Range	M (SD)	Med	Mode
1	14	6-10	8.43 (1.28)	9.0	9
2	14	6-10	8.79 (1.05)	9.0	9
4	14	7-10	9.07 (1.14)	9.5	10
5	14	7-10	9.21 (.89)	9.0	9/10*
6	14	6-10	8.86 (1.46)	9.5	10
7	14	6-10	8.86 (1.23)	9.0	10

*Bimodal

Items Related to PsTL 1907W Course Objectives

The series of items related to PsTL 1907W course objectives asked, “On a 1 to 10 scale, where 1 = ‘not at all’ and 10 = ‘outstanding,’ please evaluate the extent to which this course accomplished each of the following goals.” The course objectives were stated exactly as provided in the syllabus (provided previously in this article). Table 2 provides the survey results for the course objectives.

Table 2
Student responses to items related to PsTL 1907W course objectives

Obj	N	Range	M (SD)	Med	Mode
1	14	6-10	9.21 (1.12)	9.5	10
2	14	7-10	8.50 (.94)	9.0	9
3	14	6-10	8.64 (1.28)	8.5	8/9*
4	14	6-10	8.93 (1.14)	9.0	9/10*
5	14	7-10	9.07 (.92)	9.0	9
6	14	6-10	9.21 (1.19)	10.0	10
7	14	8-10	9.43 (.73)	10.0	10

*Bimodal

Items Related to Implementation of Integrated Multicultural Instructional Design

The faculty member for PsTL 1907W also chose to include items related to the implementation of integrated multicultural instructional design (IMID; Duranczyk & Higbee, 2012; Higbee & Goff, in press; Higbee, Goff, & Schultz, 2012; Higbee, Schultz, & Goff, 2010; Schultz & Higbee, 2011) in the final course evaluation. The instructions for this section of the instrument stated, “This course was designed using the principles of integrated multicultural instructional design (IMID), a model for developing inclusive curricula. On a 1 to 10 scale, where 1 = “not at all” and 10 = “outstanding,” please evaluate the extent to which this course accomplished each of the following goals.” The specific items were:

- Professor Higbee uses a variety of teaching methods that reflect a commitment to engaging a diverse student population.
- Professor Higbee integrates multicultural perspectives within the course content.
- Professor Higbee provides learning support within the course and/or provides resources for learning support.
- Professor Higbee uses assessment and grading procedures that provide equitable opportunities for success for all students in the course, including multiple ways for students to demonstrate knowledge.
- Professor Higbee articulates a commitment to diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice and demonstrates that commitment through her teaching methods, course content, and procedures for evaluating student learning.

The results for these items are included in Table 3.

Table 3
Student responses to items related to integrated multicultural instructional design (IMID)

Item	N	Range	M (SD)	Med	Mode
Teaching Methods	14	7-10	9.29 (.91)	9.5	10
Content Integration	14	7-10	9.29 (.91)	9.5	10
Learning Support	14	7-10	9.36 (1.01)	10.0	10
Assessment	14	7-10	9.36 (.93)	10.0	10
Commitment	14	7-10	9.50 (.94)	10.0	10

Results of Standard Rating of Teaching

The range of responses for SRTs is 1= strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = agree, and 6 = strongly agree. Of the 15 students enrolled in the course, 14 responded to the SRT questionnaire. Some of the SRT items that are most meaningful to the faculty member (e.g., “The instructor treated me with respect”: $M = 5.93$; “The instructor provided feedback intended to improve my course performance”: $M = 5.79$) are less relevant to the purpose of this paper. More important to this research was the item, “I have a deeper understanding of the subject matter as a result of this course,” for which the range of responses was 4 to 6, the mean was 5.64, the median and mode were both 6, and the standard deviation was .61. Another item, “My interest in the subject matter was stimulated by this course,” received the same ratings. For both items 10 of 14 students (71%) responded strongly agree.

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

Several of the prompts used in the focus group were designed to explore whether students believed they had accomplished the University of Minnesota SLOs and PsTL 1907W course objectives without asking as directly as in the course evaluation. Each of the following sections summarizes the responses for one of the focus group prompts.

Learning About Social Justice in the U.S.

The first question asked by the focus group facilitators was, “What have you learned about diversity and social justice in the U.S. as a result of your participation in PsTL 1907W?” Student responses included the following:

- “I would like to say that I noticed at the end of this last portion of the class, I think that we learned a lot about race and how it’s a social construction. And how it is something that is used as primarily when discussing class and how that’s not the only option holding any power to anything. I think that’s really interesting.”
- “I just really appreciated discussing diversity and really having to think about it 'cause, yeah, I’ve talked about it in a lot of other classes but not this in-depth and . . . going into different aspects of diversity rather than just race and I think the discussion methods and everything really made all of us think critically about it..”
- “Yeah, I agree with that, too, like when I think that people think of diversity it’s primarily race, but we learned a variety of different things like disability as we said and I think we are all kind of aware that it was there but now we are more like accepting overall with everything.”

Thus, several students talked about how broadly the term diversity was defined for purposes of the course, and specifically about the inclusion of disability in the “diversity mix” (Higbee, Couillard, & Kalivoda, 2012):

- “I feel like I have learned a lot about disabilities. I feel like we focused a lot on that. And then instead of just learning about disabilities we learned more about how people with disabilities actually feel. As a person with a disability I guess.”

- “Well going off what she said before, like I feel like in other classes we talk about like diversity, social justice, and everything, but we never really talk about the disability side of it and I know she [the faculty member] kind of talked about like something she focuses on and so I definitely have learned a lot more about that and like what she's said like about how they feel and everything, because we don't really talk about that in any other classes.”

Use of Socratic Method

The next prompt was, “This class used the Socratic method commonly used in graduate-level seminars. Students develop their own discussion questions and discussion is seldom facilitated by the faculty member. How did you feel about that?” The ensuing conversation went like this:

- “I think that it was really effective and . . . I appreciate that a lot because I noticed that in many of my other classes whenever we watch films or whenever we review articles or read chapters of the book we always have a lot of questions that sometimes we end up we don't really write them down all the time but we want to ask. We may want to ask the instructor or we don't really feel comfortable asking a peer. And I think that it was really helpful because there were many questions that I had with some of the films that we viewed here that I was like OK it is good to be able to ask and you know some of the chapters that we have to read in the book. . . . I really like that—it helped me learn a lot better.”
- “Yeah, when we ask the discussion questions instead of the instructor it like insures that what we're talking about is things that we are interested in and curious about instead of just what the faculty member might think is important. But this way we know that we care about the things that we are talking about and have interest in them.”
- “I also like that the discussions are really small and like you just feel like—at least I did—like really comfortable with what you are saying and like the group in general too is pretty diverse and that like you don't feel uncomfortable with what you are saying and it's just a good atmosphere to talk about in and to get what you are like thinking about because you're in a smaller group rather than a large lecture.”
- “I feel like having a discussion with like such a little class and this environment really helped get a lot of viewpoints like because there was so many variations of how people think and then our discussions led to other discussions that I feel like it wasn't so planned out that I feel that it was like a lot of like real ideas and like real things were being said so it wasn't so set up.”

At this point one of the facilitators improvised with a follow-up prompt, asking, “Yeah, so you can share maybe when you watch a film, you can share a lot of common thoughts, and maybe something that you are all interested in or have questions about that. I am really curious about in other courses—are there any such discussions or does the professor always facilitate the class? Or you know the teachers give lectures or something?” The conversation continued,

- “For some of my classes like my writing class, it's very like structured and she always asks questions and everybody is just like silent. [laughter] Well, people probably are tired because it's like really early in the morning, but she usually asks us like different little questions on like the task, text and everyone is really like speechless like I have no idea.”
- “Well, I was going to say that like in like most of my other classes it's not really like discussion based like this one but like in this class it seems like the discussion is like the most necessary part because like everybody here has like they come from such different places and so like I feel like the discussion really makes the class because everybody has so many different viewpoints even though we are doing the same thing and so I feel like it's just important for this class.”
- “I was going to say that I think that so for example in my history class that I am taking the only time that we ever really have discussion because we do talk about a lot but we don't really just have like a full group discussion unless someone asks an interesting question and that's where the difference is with this class.”
- “The other thing is, I think someone stated before the classroom environment is very open like sitting in a circle. I know we hate moving the chairs, but it actually brings us like more together and it's easier to be like seeing someone face-to-face rather than someone behind you so you have no way to like know if

- they're talking or whatever.”
- “Also like, I feel like with my other discussions in my other courses like the TAs [teaching assistants] are kind of just like looking for an answer like they give they say a question and they're like expecting a certain answer. With this class it's just so much freedom like there is no right or wrong answers and just pretty much what's on your mind and so I think that's like a good tool that like there's so much freedom and that like were not forced to talk but like we can and it's a good environment.”
 - “I really appreciate the free environment.”

What Students Liked About the Class

The facilitator followed next with, “What have you enjoyed most about PsTL 1907W?” Student responses included:

- “For me it's been definitely like how easy it has been to come here and just say what is on your mind and like nobody here like judges anybody even just like say it and people like listen to you and have like responses and everything. So definitely how helpful it is.”
- “Yeah I agree with that and just the flexibility and freedom of the class. And it's like it relates to us like everyone because diversity is a real thing, it's not like calculus and you're like never going to use this”
- “I guess I just liked the diversity of each class like sometimes we would watch a movie and sometimes we would have discussion and sometimes people would present—just like keeping the different aspects from each class so it's not the same thing every week. I guess. I liked that.”

It was particularly interesting that many of the focus group participants chose to address the nature of the course assignments, as demonstrated in the following comments:

- “I enjoyed most of the assignments, like for instance taking magazine clips and comparing it to like different social justice issues and it's like our everyday pop culture actually relates to us so it's interesting to find that.”
- “Yeah, I really enjoyed the assignments, especially the final project just because I would never do spoken word anywhere else and so like here to be able to try that.”
- “I agree this is a really different class though like everyone was saying the assignments actually relate to what's going on like [another student] was saying we can just pour out in the assignments instead of like having to worry about if were saying the right thing and if this is the right answer.”
- “Yeah, cause there is so much freedom in the assignments”

What Students Liked Least or Found Most Challenging

Next the facilitator asked, “What aspect of PsTL 1907W have you liked least? Or what has been the most challenging?” Interestingly, although the readings, films, and other media included in the course addressed age, gender, sexual orientation, social class, language, citizenship, immigration status, religion, and many other aspects of social identity, students perceived an emphasis on disability and race, as indicated in the following quotes:

- “I don't know if this is like something I least liked, but I don't know it kinda bugged me like although talking about disabilities is obviously important but like I feel like we focused a lot on that type of diversity and racial diversity. I'm not saying that those are not problems but there is so many other types of diversity going on in our culture that I feel like not touching those is like almost injustice to those diversities as well so I would like to branch out to other ones.”
- “Yeah, I also noticed that I think a lot of the classes bout racial . . .”
- “I'll have to agree with that what [another student] said like when we watched a video clip with the dancing and it was interesting to look at that approach of diversity because it was like you know a different kind of tap and for them dancing it was two different styles but at the end of the day the message was still kind of about race and like diversity with that and so it was like you know it would have been nice to branch out more.”

It was clear from several of the comments that the amount of freedom students had in designing their own assignments was challenging, yet still appreciated, as noted in this response:

- “I don't know if I disliked this, but I think it was kind of challenging with the amount of freedom just making sure like expectations were met like I didn't like with the project and the paper I just wanted to make sure that like I did not do too little work or like I was on the right track because there was so much freedom you could really do anything. So that was a little challenging but I mean at the same time I still really did like it ‘cause you had a lot of options.”

Several students responded to this student’s comment by saying that they thought that the assignments were well organized, but they still would have liked more clarification, given the broad range of choices, and more benchmarks. Other comments focused more on environmental factors, such as staying engaged for the duration of the class (2.5 hours) and the small size of the classroom, which made moving the chairs into different configurations difficult.

DISCUSSION

It is not the intent of this paper to convey that any of the research results are generalizable to other courses or institutions; the population for this research is a class of 15 students. Furthermore, the course evaluated was designed specifically for the freshman seminar model used at the University of Minnesota, and to be taught only by the faculty member who created it. The purpose of this paper is to encourage faculty to think more intentionally about their institution’s student learning outcomes as well as the objectives they establish for their own courses. What course activities and assignments contribute to the achievement of SLOs and course objectives? Might different pedagogical models be more effective in achieving the desired results? How do faculty know whether students are really acquiring the content knowledge and developing the skills (e.g., oral and written communication, critical thinking and problem solving) intended by the faculty member? As previously stated, there are many methods of seeking answers to these questions (National Institute, 2012). This paper merely demonstrates how one faculty member chose to collect additional data to determine student perspectives on whether a course was achieving its goals.

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NOTES