

General Education Understanding Society Assessment

September 14 - September 2015

In 2014-2015, the General Education Committee facilitated the assessment of the Understanding Society GE area. This GE area includes lower- and upper-division courses in Anthropology, Communication Studies, Interdisciplinary/Urban Studies, Economics & Business, History, Political Science, and Sociology. Lower-division Understanding Society courses comprise 50% of the area offerings. However, they are offered every semester and, thus usually, well-enrolled.

The assessment efforts were focused on a syllabi review, certification criteria revision, the SLO modification and direct assessment of student learning in relation to the area outcomes, which at that time were identical with the area certification criteria: *Students will be able to*

- a) *identify foundational theories that offer explanations of social, political, economic, and/or cultural phenomena;*
- b) *apply foundational theories to analyze contemporary problems or controversies;*
- c) *make personal and social application of various theories—informed by a biblical perspective.*

Indirect Assessment

In the fall of 2014, the GE Committee reviewed all 7 syllabi of the Understanding Society courses offered that semester. The syllabus review confirms that the majority of courses meet the certification criteria, although only 35% of syllabi followed the college's syllabus template. This shortcoming was addressed at the Social Sciences department chair meeting.

During the fall semester, faculty teaching Understanding Society courses revised the area certification criteria and the interpretive statement. When new certification criteria were reviewed by the faculty teaching courses certified for this GE area, the syllabus review results were the basis for refining the Interpretive Statement and Certification Criteria.

Direct Assessment

Methods and Tools

The direct assessment was carried out by a team of faculty teaching Understanding Society courses with Tom Knecht serving as the Coordinator. In Fall 2014, the group of faculty teaching Understanding Society courses reviewed and modified the area Certification Criteria and the Interpretive Statement. In Spring 2015, the faculty developed an analytical rubric and prompt to evaluate student responses to the embedded signature assignment based on disciplinary-specific course readings. In Spring 2015, student responses were collected via LiveText from the following courses: AN-001: Intro to Cultural Anthropology; COM-006: Messages, Meaning and Culture; EB-011: Principles of Macroeconomics; HIS-178: California Experience; POL-010: American Government; and SOC-001: Introduction to Sociology.

The entire assessment sample consisted of 142 student artifacts collected from 67% of all students who earned the Understanding Society credit in the spring semester or 29% of all

students who fulfilled the requirement in the fall, spring, and May term semesters of that academic year. Thus, the sample was representative for this GE area. Since there is no prerequisite for the GE US courses, first-year, sophomore, junior and senior students participated in this assessment.

It was expected that in all courses the same prompt questions will be used. However, they appeared to be modified in one of the courses. While reviewing the scoring results, the group also found some inconsistency in scoring student works by individual instructors. There was some disagreement among faculty regarding what should be qualified as “highly developed,” “developed,” “emerging” and “initial” scores. These aforementioned inconsistencies of data collection and scoring may have skewed the results.

In the summer of 2015, five faculty members from the Social Sciences and Humanities, two department chairs from the Social Sciences and Dean of Curriculum and Educational Effectiveness met to discuss the assessment results and develop recommendations for improvement. During the spring semester, the faculty teaching the Understanding Society courses developed an analytical four-level rubric (1) for evaluating signature assignments relevant to each particular discipline. This rubric was used for assessing student learning in the following six classes: AN-001: Intro to Cultural Anthropology; COM-006: Messages, Meaning and Culture; EB-011: Principles of Macroeconomics; HIS-178: California Experience; POL-010: American Government; and SOC-001: Introduction to Sociology. The scoring was done by course instructors.

Results

Some challenges with the data collection and scoring reliability made the results suggestive rather than conclusive, but clear trends emerged as a result of this assessment. Nearly 75% of the students showed “highly developed” or “developed” capacities for identifying foundational theories and approaches. A slightly lower percentage was able to apply theories and approaches for analyzing historical or contemporary problems. The results also suggested that the most notable area of challenge for students is *Reflections on theory application from a biblical perspective*. Only half of the students were able to demonstrate “developed” or “highly developed” capacity in this dimension. This pattern is characteristic of the entire sample and of most lower-division courses (Table 1).

Table 1: Understanding Society Assessment Results

n-142	Highly Developed (A) (4 pts)	Developed (B) (3 pts)	Emerging (C) (2 pts)	Initial (D) (1 pts)	Mean	Mode	Stdev
Knowledge of approaches and theories...	<u>58</u>	<u>55</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>2</u>	3.190	4.000	0.787
Application of approaches and theories...	<u>44</u>	<u>60</u>	<u>32</u>	<u>6</u>	3.000	3.000	0.839
Reflections on theory application from a biblical perspective...	<u>27</u>	<u>48</u>	<u>46</u>	<u>21</u>	2.570	3.000	0.960

Knowledge of approaches	58 (40%)	55 (38%)	27 (19%)	2 (1%)
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and theories...

Application of approaches and theories...	44 (30%)	60 (42%)	32 (22%)	6 (4%)
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Reflections on theory application from a biblical perspective...	27 (19%)	48 (33%)	46 (32%)	21 (14%)
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█ Highly Developed (A)
 █ Developed (B)
 █ Emerging (C)
 █ Initial (D)

In the upper-division course, 80% of students demonstrated “highly developed” or “developed” levels in the “Knowledge” and “Application” dimensions of the rubric while 66% of students were able to deliberate theory application from a biblical perspective.

As far as we can see through this snapshot, the results from this assessment revealed that students in lower- and upper-division courses are learning relatively well how to identify and apply theories relevant to different scholarly disciplines represented in the Understanding Society GE area, even though some improvements can be introduced to most courses fulfilling this GE category. It seems, however, that the integration of faith and learning in the Understanding Society courses requires more attention.

Closing the Loop

The faculty participated in the Understanding Society assessment developed the following recommendations, including the new language for the area SLO; the latter was approved by the General Education Committee and Academic Senate on September 7, 2015.

Recommendations

1. The faculty teaching the Understanding Society courses will use assessment results for adjusting their pedagogical strategies in individual courses fulfilling this GE requirement. More specifically, they will consider ways to more fully engage students in discussions on theory application; to deliberate theory applications specific to their discipline as compared to other social sciences; to give quizzes on foundational theories prior to administering the signature assignment; to include more reading materials with Christian faith application in their courses; and to coach students to think more critically about reading these materials, especially controversial ones.
2. Faculty teaching the Understanding Society courses will continue assessing student learning in this GE area by administering the signature assignment and by scoring student essays as per the refined rubric. The signature assignment will be administered at the end of the academic semester in all courses fulfilling this GE requirement. Samples of “highly-developed,” “developed,” “emerging” and “initial” responses to the signature assignment prompt will be collected by all contributing departments and shall be used for establishing consistent scoring criteria across this GE area prior to the next round of assessment.

In the future, the assessment of this GE area will be focused on the *Application of Approaches and Theories* category. The rubric will be modified while the *Reflections*

category will be eliminated. All students will be familiarized with the scoring rubric in advance and will respond to the following prompt question: *Identify TWO theories or approaches you would use to analyze the problems presented in the article/material according to them. Provide your rationale for using these approaches and then thoroughly apply one theory before you apply the second theory.*

3. The SLO will read: ***Students will apply appropriate foundational theories to analyze social, political, economic, and/or cultural phenomena.***

4. The faculty will be striving for a higher percentage of students at the “highly developed” and “developed” levels and the performance standards for this GE area will be tentatively established as follows: ***In all the Knowledge category of the rubric, 75% of students will perform at the “developed” level or better, while in the Application category, 70% of students will perform at the “developed” level or better.***

Given that the majority of students the Understanding Society credit are first year and sophomore students, these standards may be somewhat ambitious. Consequently, the standards shall be reviewed after next several rounds of the Understanding Society assessment.

5. The assessment results prompted a discussion about pedagogies and student learning. As the faculty were less satisfied with students’ abilities to think about social theories from the perspective of their faith the group decided to continue the discussion on teaching the integration of faith and learning in the tradition of our Brown Bag Conversations. By opening this conversation, we can discuss where and how these skills are explicitly taught in the Understanding Society. Following these Brown Bag Conversations, the academic departments offering the Understanding Society courses will develop and share their internal criteria for evaluating student reflections on theory application from a biblical perspective. Finally, a detailed plan will be set to improve student learning in this area.

Closing the Loop Activities

The first Understanding Society Brown Bag Conversation took place on September 15, 2015. Eight participants (five faculty from the Social Sciences and the Humanities, two librarians serving as library liaisons to the social science departments, and an academic administrator) provided examples how to read passages from the Bible through the professional lenses of their disciplines; how to discuss the relevance of creation and redemption in their courses; and how to integrate Christian values into classroom discussions and pedagogical practices. Conversation of this nature needs to be continued.

Reference

(1) Rubric: http://www.westmont.edu/_academics/achievement/documents/u-s-rubric.docx