

Communication Studies Department 2012 Annual Assessment Update

- I. Departmental Documents: Mission Statement, Program Goals, Student Learning Outcomes, Curriculum Map and Multi-year Assessment Plan.
- A. Mission Statement:
http://www.westmont.edu/_academics/departments/communication_studies/mission.html
 - B. Program Learning Outcomes:
http://www.westmont.edu/_academics/departments/communication_studies/ProgramReview.html
 - C. Curriculum Map:
http://www.westmont.edu/_academics/departments/communication_studies/ProgramReview.html
 - D. Multi-year Assessment plan:
http://www.westmont.edu/_academics/departments/communication_studies/ProgramReview.html
- II. Follow up on Action items identified in previous reports
- A. PRC letter: “Participate in assessing the writing ILO, and this will also yield data for your departmental PLO.” We assessed our writing PLO this year. Omedi Ochieng was in charge. See discussion in III.
 - B. PRC letter: “In the next round of assessment (from the Multi-Year Plan it is scheduled for 2012-13), focus on assessing ‘Disciplinary Knowledge’ regardless of the existence of a capstone course.”

We are switching Oral Presentations (scheduled for 2014) and Disciplinary knowledge for the 2012-2013 year in order to help provide thoughtful input for the college-wide Oral Communication learning objective (GE) that Tatiana has on her agenda this year. We therefore have pushed disciplinary knowledge back to 2014-2015. Tatiana approved this switch (per phone conversation on Sept 18, 2012).
 - C. PRC letter: “Please revisit the issue of instituting a capstone course and appraise what resources you will need in order to implement such a change.”

A new version of a Senior Seminar course, not offered for four years, will be offered spring 2013. The course will require a capstone project. Though the course is not required for all majors, it will provide capstone data and help us in starting the discussion. This year *and next* we will discuss the feasibility of a capstone course and how to proceed with a capstone requirement for all majors and the resources we will need. We want to wait until Omedi is back from his sabbatical before we make major curricular changes; he needs to be a part of these conversations.
 - D. PRC letter: “From previous years several items are still pending. As time permits, would you consider a) Researching and applying for external research grants, and b) “Meeting with interested parties regarding the Film Studies minor and revising or amending Scott Anderson’s proposal.”

We have not, as a department, applied for external research grants (beyond the “dream” grant offered by Gayle Beebe to all departments). Regarding the Film Studies minor, we participated in several meetings during the year with the Provost and the representatives from English, Art, and Theater. The Film Studies minor is not action items for us as a Dept.
- III. 2012 Focus: Written Communication PLO, specifically argumentation. In keeping with the PRC’s request to match our departmental assessment with Westmont’s General Education assessment, we focused on our written communication PLO for this year. It reads “We want our graduates to be able to . . . practice eloquent communication . . . to communicate effectively in written form.” Given our assessment results in 2010, we decided to work on the quality of argumentation in our students’ written work.

A. Summary of methods and data collected:

1. We analyzed 29 argumentation outlines/papers total. From COM 138, International Rhetoric, we collected 14 papers with argument outlines attached. All four department members assessed all 14 papers/arguments. We also evaluated 15 argumentation forms collected from COM 130, Argumentation and Debate.

We used “excellent, acceptable, unacceptable” categories to assess claims students made and the reasons they used to support these claims.

- a. Excellent: Good use of evidence to support claims; seemed to understand warrants/evidence/claims relationships.
 - b. Acceptable: Had some good connections in terms of evidence, but lacking ability to fully tie everything to together, or had very weak evidence to support a pretty big claim;
 - c. Unacceptable -- very weak evidence, lack of understanding of the relationship among claim/warrant/evidence, big claims w/ very little in the way of evidence or reasoning to get to the acceptance of the claim.
2. Our benchmark was that we wanted 85% of our students to argue at the “acceptable” level.
 3. Data is in the assessment data file.

B. Interpretation of results:

1. After reading the arguments independently, we met as a department on April 11th, 2012 to compare our results. At this time we also revised our argumentation form and discussed ways to improve student arguments via assignments in our courses. Also, we decided to evaluate 15 more arguments (gathered from the argumentation class) and then met again on August 22, 2012 to discuss.

Argumentation Assessment Summary Table

| | Excellent | Acceptable | Unacceptable |
|--------------|-----------|------------|--------------|
| Com 138 data | 2 | 8 | 4 |
| | | | |
| Com 130 data | 5 | 6 | 4 |
| | | | |
| total | 7 | 14 | 8 |

2. We learned that too many arguments were in the unacceptable category. Since, as a department, we value argumentation, we expressed frustration at the number of students not making excellent or acceptable arguments. Further analyses of the data revealed that many students need to learn to write clear theses (instead of a book report). They don’t adequately understand what constitutes a claim (rather than a description of a “fact”). We discussed cultural causes to poor argumentation: how computers encourage students to start writing before they have adequately prepared their ideas, how the speediness of American and academic culture discourages the thoughtfulness required to create and evaluate good propositions, and how cultural values of tolerance get misapplied to “the tolerance of poor arguments.”
3. We also realized that when the focus of the class or the assignment is on argumentation, the students performed better (see summary table – see the contrast between the COM 138 and the COM 130 data evaluations). The COM 130 class (argumentation) yielded more “excellent” evaluations.

4. We have confidence that the data gathered represents our students' efforts that the rubric applied was useful as well.
5. **Curriculum** design: discussion of argumentation currently occurs explicitly in 006. We agreed that 98 and 015 would also have at least some argumentation instruction and one argumentation assignment. We are discussing which upper division courses are best suited for more explicit teaching (reinforcement) of argumentation.
6. Currently, COM 006 introduces argumentation and provides a form to help students argue better. During Spring 2012, we revised the form students use for that course, to make more explicit the nature of "good argumentation."

C. Closing the loop:

1. This is what we have decided to do (PROCESS) to close the loop:
 - We have revised the "Argumentation and Criteria Worksheet" for COM 006 so that it is more descriptive of what we desire in a good argument. We have changed the form for the outline itself and also added a full page on "Some tips on argumentation." These tips include a series of questions students should ask about their thesis, reasons and evidence, as well as specifics about what to avoid in their arguments. We will use this in COM 006 this year.
 - We have distributed the COM 006 student materials to all department faculty (the worksheet and tips, plus examples of good and bad arguments) so that all professors can brainstorm ways to utilize this form for their various assignments. The Faculty are deciding how to incorporate this form this year (no specific plans right now- we are in the exploratory stage).
 - We decided that COM 006 should change one assignment so that the outline of a paper must be turned in (and returned) before the paper is written.
 - We discussed requiring all courses in the major's Category III to have a certain consistent argumentation content focus, but we did not agree to move ahead with this as yet. We are waiting until the return of Ochieng from sabbatical in Fall 2013
 - Omedi Ochieng has been given the assignment of providing a sheet that shows a poor argument transformed into a strong one. He will provide that when he gets back from Sabbatical in Fall 2013.
 - Lesa Stern and Deborah Dunn agreed that they would incorporate Toulmin's argumentation model into an assignment in COM 015 in Fall 2012.
2. (ACTION) We will incorporate these argumentation forms and repeated exposure to argumentation over the next 3 years and then revisit (assess) student argumentation skills.

IV. Next steps

A. Action items:

1. We are testing out a senior assignment that incorporates a senior "capstone" project in Spring 2013. We will discuss a true required senior capstone course this year and next (Ochieng is on sabbatical. We do not want to make decisions with 25% of our faculty gone). Stern is in charge of leading these discussions over the next 2 years.
2. We will incorporate the argumentation forms and repeated exposure to argumentation over the next 3 years and then revisit (assess) student argumentation skills. Ochieng is in charge of this in 3 years.

B. Update multi-year plan

Modified the plan: switched Oral Presentation assessment with Disciplinary Knowledge assessment to be more in alignment with College assessment of Oral Communication.

V. Appendices

A. PRC letter from 2011

B. Instruments used in 2012 collection of data

C. Rubrics used to evaluate data

We used “excellent, acceptable, unacceptable” categories to assess claims students made and the reasons they used to support these claims.

- a. Excellent: Good use of evidence to support claims; seemed to understand warrants/evidence/claims relationships.
- b. Acceptable: Had some good connections in terms of evidence, but lacking ability to fully tie everything to together, or had very weak evidence to support a pretty big claim;
- c. Unacceptable -- very weak evidence, lack of understanding of the relationship among claim/warrant/evidence, big claims w/ very little in the way of evidence or reasoning to get to the acceptance of the claim.

D. New “Argumentation and Criteria Worksheet”

**Some tips on argumentation for your papers.
Please consider these as you fill out the form on the following page.**

THESIS: What are you asserting?

What do you want your readers/hearers to believe/not believe or to do/not do?

If your audience remembers **one** thing from your discourse, what would that one thing be?

Try to avoid using words such as *shows, demonstrates, illuminates, exemplifies*, etc., because these terms lean toward informing your audience rather than persuading them. Use terms such as *asserts, argues, believes*, etc.

An audience member should be able to answer this question: “How am I being asked to change my mind?” rather than “What new information is being suggested to me?”

REASONS: Why should your audience accept the assertion that you have made?

Why should they change their beliefs or actions?

If you were in conversation and someone heard your assertion and then said, “Interesting idea. Why should I accept it?” what would you say?

Think in terms of “because,” as in “You should believe that Hitler was a puppet of Stalin **BECAUSE** _____.”

As a reminder to yourself, you could (in your outline) use parallel language at the beginning of each reason, such as repeating the above phrase three times and filling in the blank differently each time.

A reason is a warrant, a premise that links the evidence/data/facts you plan to supply with the thesis/assertion/claim that you are making.

EVIDENCE: What supports your reasons?

Since your audience will not accept your reasons “just because you said so,” what support or data makes your reasons more credible, more believable?

Support might come in the form of 1) citations from the discourse you are analyzing, 2) authoritative experts who corroborate your ideas (preferably in more insightful or eloquent ways than you can state), 3) studies that verify that what you think is true has been substantiated empirically, or 4) ethical/biblical connections to your reasons.

Here’s a test: With a friend, talk through your thesis and reasons. If you stumble through it, chances are you will stumble through your paper or speech. See if your friend can repeat your thesis back to you. If not, you may not be as clear as you think you are. If your friend understands your ideas, ask him/her to argue against your ideas. If you are able to defend yourself to your friend’s satisfaction, you are probably well on your way to a good argument.

If you learn to argue well (strategically, sensitively, ethically), you will be in the top one percent of students! Employers *love* articulate, other-centered employees who can defend ideas well.

Argument and Criteria Worksheet

My thesis (the primary argument/position of paper):

My thesis asserts a position which meets these criteria:

- ___ It goes beyond merely exemplifying (illustrating/demonstrating) a theory.
- ___ It needs to be defended in order for someone to accept it. (It isn't "obvious.")

The first reason to accept my thesis: _____

This reason meets these criteria:

- ___ It provides the reader with justification for accepting the thesis.
- ___ It is not merely a "fact" that occurs somewhere in the discourse I am examining. (Facts offer *support*.)

The second reason to accept my thesis: _____

This reason meets these criteria:

- ___ It provides the reader with justification for accepting the thesis.
- ___ It is not merely a "fact" that occurs somewhere in the discourse I am examining. (Facts offer *support*.)

The third reason to accept my thesis: _____

This reason meets these criteria:

- ___ It provides the reader with justification for accepting the thesis.
- ___ It is not merely a "fact" that occurs somewhere in the discourse I am examining. (Facts offer *support*.)

___ These three reasons make my thesis more believable (more acceptable) to my reader.