

Evidence: Program Assessment for Continuous Improvement

ASSESSMENT BRIEFS

UPCOMING EVENT

NJ Colleges Assessment Symposium

On April 10th Stockton will host a one-day symposium for assessment personnel from New Jersey colleges. Provost Kesselman will address the group at the Stockton Seaview Resort and the discussions for the day will center on the use of assessment findings in supporting student learning. We will have more information in the March issue of Evidence.

You are invited to **Focus on Assessment on Day of Scholarship**

Where: F111

When 1:50 – 2:55 on Thursday March 20th.

On Thursday, March 20th professors from the Schools of Business, Education, Health, Natural Sciences and Mathematics, and Social and Behavioral Sciences will present their classroom assessment research projects and describe the develop-

ment of measures, the use, or planned use of their findings, and the ways in which each project is related to student learning.

The presenters have a variety of projects that showcase different approaches to assessment, and the session will be relevant to both teachers and learners.

Come to learn about developing rubrics for creative dance and for the essential

learning outcomes. Come to hear faculty describe their work in assessing information literacy and reflective thinking.

You will also be invited to assess the merits of varieties of homemade cookies!



Quantifying Quality: Peer and Student Review of Teaching

At the last meeting of the college-wide assessment committee, we discussed the balance of peer review of teaching, and that of student ratings (IDEA) in the evaluation of teaching quality for personnel review. One faculty member questioned the relative importance of each of the two types of feedback and invited the assessment committee members to reflect on the question –

Are peer observation reports as valuable to evaluators (PRC, FRC, and Deans) as are IDEA student ratings?

There were no deans at the meeting but most faculty had served on PRCs and some on the FRC. The only exceptions were the two early career faculty members on the committee; they added valuable perspective to the discussion.

The good news is that the general conclusion from the voices of fourteen experienced and two early career faculty, was that these two different sources of information about teaching quality are appropriately weighted and both bring useful data

from different perspectives. Peer evaluation reports are becoming more elaborate, structured on the standards for good teaching, and aligned with the language of the contractual obligations of faculty. This makes them more useful to committee members who use them in evaluations. Although these reports are summative in nature, there was strong opinion that formative comments about areas of teaching practice that should be improved, gave more credibility to the reports.



Where in the world is HIST 2128?

Submitted by Michelle McDonald, Associate Professor History

What do Aztec warriors, enslaved women, and maritime archeologists have in common? All appear on the syllabus of HIST 2128: Atlantic History, 1492-1888, and each is the subject of an engaging, student-created website which went live in fall 2013, the first in a series of experiments undertaken by Stockton's Historical Studies Program to test the applicability of Educational Learning Objectives, or ELOs, in the classroom.

For the past year and a half, the HIST program has been collecting syllabi in a specially designated Blackboard site, grouped by 1000, 2000, 3000, and 4000-level classes, to enable us to more easily compare not only reading loads and assignment difficulty, but also—and more importantly—whether courses were adequately preparing students to move through the program efficiently and successfully. Most faculty agreed that 1000 and 2000-level courses, which include as many non-majors as HIST majors (as well as students yet to declare a major—what we like to call “pre-HIST majors”) often place greater emphasis on introducing students to key events, concepts, and people. Courses such as HIST 1152: American History to 1865, HIST 2406: The Middle Ages, and HIST 2199: Ancient Egypt are the building blocks of our field, offering solid overviews to those looking to fill their H requirement, or the stuff of “what,” “when,” and “where” questions that HIST majors need to master before moving on to the more important considerations of why and how that dominate their upper level coursework.

HIST 2128: Atlantic History, 1492-1888 falls squarely into the former category. The course begins just prior to the exploits of Columbus in 1492, whose voyages irrevocably united the continents of the eastern and western Atlantic, and ends with the abolition of slavery in Brazil in 1888 (for a fuller description, see: <http://blogs.stockton.edu/hist2128>). I have taught HIST 2128 four times since I arrived at Stockton eight years ago. The first time was my inaugural semester teaching full-time. Consequently, it is a bit hazy. Back in those dark ages of 2006 there was no Atlantic history textbook, and I cobbled together a syllabus and reading list via the time-honored tradition of academic recycling. Namely, I read every Atlantic history syllabus I could lay my hands on, considered my own interests and strengths in the field, assembled readings I thought would appeal to undergraduate readers, and hoped for the best. Reflection? Assessment? I was still struggling with creation, thank you very much.

During the second and third iterations, fall 2007 and spring 2011, I tried to incorporate evaluation more systematically. Stockton had turned to the IDEA system by 2007, so I modified the course description to emphasize both content acquisition (an understanding of key figures, events, places, and concepts and their relevance to the field of study) and skill building (ability to locate and assess primary and secondary source material, to form an historical argument, and to write clearly and persuasively). And I specified three IDEA-based course goals:

1. Gaining factual knowledge (terminology, classifications, methods, and trend).
2. Developing skills in expressing ideas orally and in writing.
3. Learning how to find and use resources for answering questions or solving problems.

Better still, I reviewed my assignments to ensure that how I asked students to demonstrate content mastery reflected these three course goals. In-class examinations required succinct definitions of key terms, events, places, and people; longer writing assignments built on close readings of primary sources as well as the ability to utilize a variety of research resources (digitized copies of eighteenth and nineteenth-century plantation manuals, for example, or slave runaway notices or privateer auction advertisements in the Early American Newspaper database available through the college library).

But then the ELOs appeared on the horizon. Between just us folks I'll be honest, when I first heard about them I thought ... I suspect moaned... "one more thing?!" But then I read them, and realized how much they reflected what I already tried to do in my courses, and enrolled in the college's 2013 Assessment Institute to see if I could verify that such was the case. I was the only humanities faculty member in a sea of social and health scientists, each far more facile with quantitative analysis than I.¹ But they were a calm and reassuring bunch, who helped with my first step of developing an assessment plan. I looked closely at the Global Awareness ELO, intended to emphasize "the appreciation of the world as an interconnected, interdependent system encompassing political, socioeconomic, and environmental interactions." This sounded like HIST 2128, particularly when I was reassured by our fearless (but still firm) task master Sonia Gonsalves that I was not expected to meet all goals articulated on the Global Awareness rubric, and indeed could modify the language as necessary to personalize it to my course objectives. I drew up a short list:



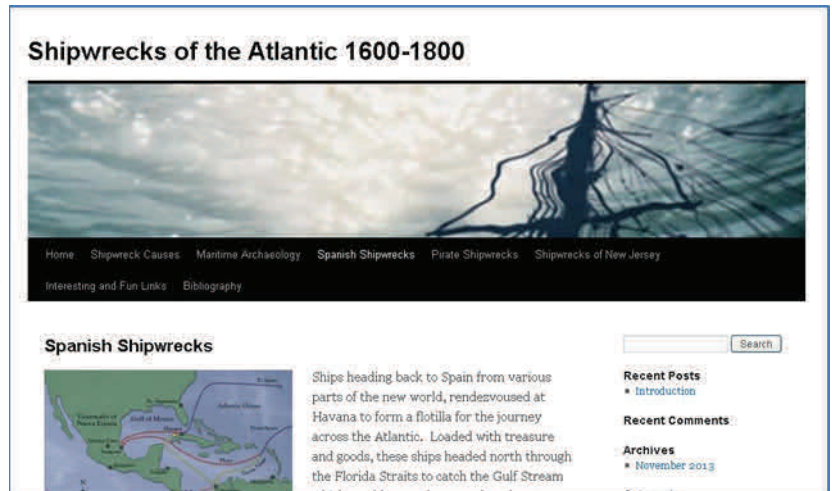
- (1.1) Know global structures and systems—where, who, what.
- (1.2) Demonstrate appreciation of diverse cultures.
- (2.4) Examine assumptions, biases, and values.
- (3.2) Discuss ways in which events in one part of the world can impact other places.

I also created a "new" assignment to measure such learning called "Atlantic Blogs." In essence, students were asked to work in small groups to develop a well-organized, scholarly, and visually appealing analysis

of one of the course's central themes. I allocated three days to introduce students to Wordpress, a software package to which Stockton already subscribes, and covered such basics as selecting a blog theme, creating pages, and inserting text, images, and weblinks. Groups worked outside of class as well, and the online nature of this assignment made it possible for them to coordinate their efforts virtually, rather than meet physically—a bonus with so many commuters.² The final results went live the last week of term, and included seven topics and spanned the breadth of the syllabus:

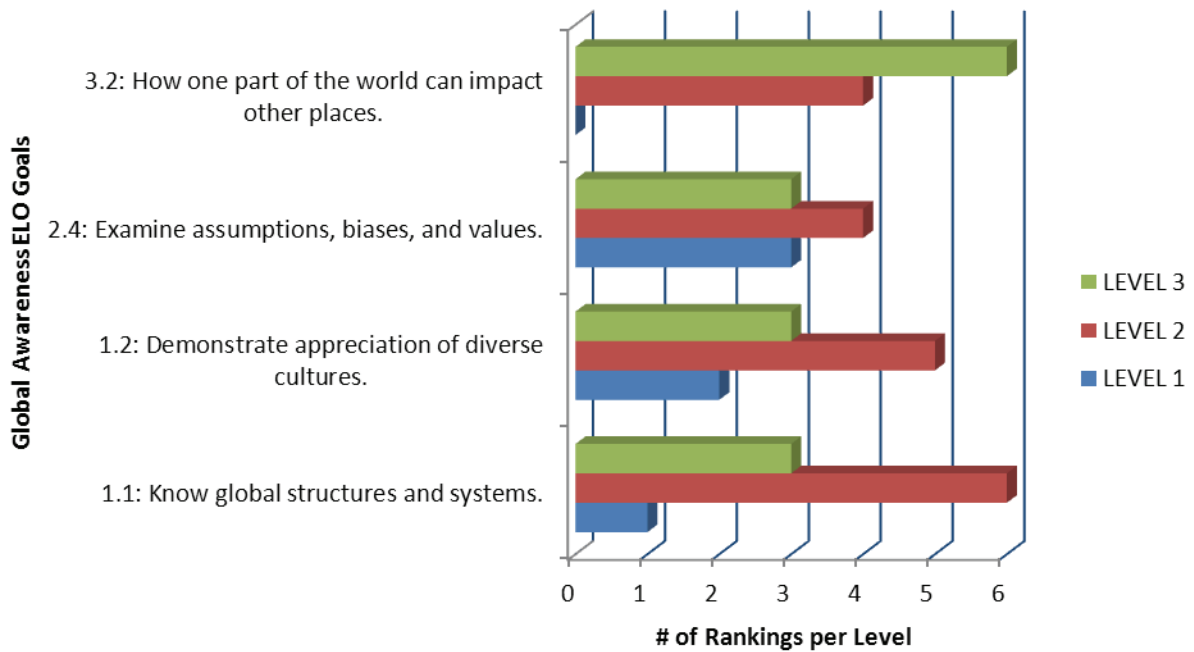
- ◆ Atlantic Health
- ◆ Aztec Society
- ◆ Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Plants and Animals
- ◆ Plantations
- ◆ Precious Metals of the Atlantic World
- ◆ Shipwrecks
- ◆ Women and Slavery

Visually appealing to be sure, and filled with facts and figures...but how well did these websites demonstrate Global Awareness? I took advantage of attending a working group at the American Historical Association’s Annual Meeting in Washington, DC to recruit a sounding board of ten Atlantic history scholars. These “volunteers” were provided with a simple scoring rubric and asked to assess each website; their results are tabulated below:



Global Awareness Goal	Level 1 (Aware)	Level 2 (Competent)	Level 3 (Skilled)
(1.1) Know global structures and systems—where, who, what.	1	6	3
(1.2) Demonstrate appreciation of diverse cultures.	2	5	3
(2.4) Examine assumptions, biases, and values.	3	4	3
(3.2) Discuss ways in which events in one part of the world can impact other places.	--	4	6

While this is but a first step, the results are encouraging. Evaluators suggested that most websites actively drew connections between different parts of the world, and sought to examine their subject from more than one cultural vantage point. They also included sufficient detail to demonstrate a “competent” level of research—and some, most notably “Plantations,” “Shipwrecks,” and “Women and Slavery,” ranked as skilled in several categories.³



More anecdotally, students definitely took to the “Atlantic Blogs” assignment—collaborating in class, emailing each other and me between class sessions. Many, admittedly not all, did significant research between computer labs and came prepared with material they had collected and edited so that we could focus on the more mechanical skills together. And they enjoyed having a project that they could easily show to others (more than one commented that this, unlike a term paper or take-home exam, would be something they could show parents or friends over break; whether they actually did so is another question, but it’s appealing to think that they did so).

Were there downsides? Indeed. Chief among these were the inevitable squabbles about whether teammates were pulling their weight and questions about writing, editing, and especially length. Websites can be wonderful resources, but I had to remind students that what they posted should be excerpted from their larger research, not its sum total—three paragraphs of material does not a thorough study make. More problematic (for me) was which lectures went on the chopping block to make room for the computer lab days, and I missed my lectures on Brazil, Barbados and Bonaire. That being said, the process made me step back, look closely at what I considered important, and reflect on how these ideas fit into larger college objectives. Not bad for a semester’s work.

¹ Sonia Gonsalves, recognizing the humanities faculty may feel less comfortable for quantifying learning, provided an excellent short essay that I recommend: David Pace, “Assessment in History: The case for ‘decoding’ the discipline,” *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 11:3 (August 2011): 107-119.

² To see the websites online, visit <https://blogs.stockton.edu/hist2128/group-exhibitions/>

³ It should be noted that not all members of these groups were HIST majors; indeed, I deliberately helped organize groups so that included a mix of majors and non-majors