

6.6.2011

## PHILOSOPHY ASSESSMENT SUMMARY 2010/2011

### INTRODUCTION

For the 2010/2011 school year at PCC, the Philosophy Department was tasked with assessing its ability to promote student learning as it pertains to the fulfillment of the College's Core Outcomes for *Communication* and *Cultural Awareness*.

**Communication:** *Communicate effectively by determining the purpose, audience and context of communication, and respond to feedback to improve clarity, coherence and effectiveness in workplace, community and academic pursuits.*

**Cultural Awareness:** *Use an understanding of the variations in human culture, perspectives and forms of expression to constructively address issues that arise out of cultural differences in the workplace and community*

### ASSESSMENT STRATEGY

For assessing the outcome of Communication, the Philosophy SAC decided to distribute a scenario for students to write a brief response to. These forms were distributed and completed once at the beginning of the term and again at the end of the term. By comparing their responses at the beginning of the term to their responses at the end of the term, it was hypothesized that student learning might be measured by observing improvements in their responses as indicated by shifts in acquired concept integration, empathetic sensitivity, and reasoned support.

*Communication* was assessed only in sections of Philosophy 205: Biomedical Ethics. The form distributed to students on the first day of class and close to the last day was as follows:

**INITIALS:** \_\_\_\_\_

*Directions for Students:* Please take five minutes to write a response to the following ethical dilemma. Try to incorporate ethical concepts and principles in your justification of the action you would take in the dilemma.

#### **Ethical Dilemma**

A friend of yours is struggling to keep up on all of his schoolwork and asks you to complete an assignment in a course you have already taken. He is busy working overtime at his job and needs to complete the coursework for this class by the end of the week or face suspension of his financial aid, which helps him, as a single parent, support his children.

*What would you do in this situation? What ethical justification would you use to support your actions?*

*Cultural Awareness* was assessed only in sections of Philosophy 204: Philosophy of Religion. The form distributed to students to students on the first day of class and close to the last day was as follows:

**INITIALS:** \_\_\_\_\_

*Directions for Students:* Please take five minutes to write a response to the following current issue. Try to incorporate cultural assumptions and viewpoints in your recommendation of what actions should be taken in this event.

### **Current Issue**

There is a proposal to build an Islamic Cultural Center and Mosque within a few blocks of Ground Zero in New York City (site of the 9/11 terrorist attacks). Should religious points of view be taken into consideration when evaluating building proposals near Ground Zero? If so, should all religious organizations be prohibited from building a facility there, or just Islamic ones?

### **IMPLEMENTATION**

Full-time faculty members John Farnum, Matt Stockton, and Mike Warwick participated as did adjunct faculty Steve Jolin.

#### Stockton

*Communication* – PHL 205: Biomedical Ethics W 6:00-9:50

The pre-survey was distributed on January 5, 2011. The post-survey was distributed on March 9, 2011. 16 students completed both the pre and post-surveys for analysis.

*Cultural Awareness* - PHL 204: Philosophy of Religion TR 3:00-4:50

The pre-survey was distributed on January 4, 2011. The post-survey was distributed on March 8, 2011. 18 students completed both the pre and post-surveys for analysis.

#### Farnum

I distributed the survey to all the students in both of my PHL 205: Biomedical Ethics classes on the first day of the Winter term, 2011, and then repeated the survey on the last day of the term prior to the scheduled day for the final exam. In my Monday/Wednesday class 9 students filled out the survey on the first day and the last day. In my Tuesday/Thursday class 13 people filled it out on the first day and the last day. The rest of the answers collected were people who were present on either the first or the last day, but not both. Therefore, I am just going to report on those surveys that will show progress from the beginning to the end of the term.

### Warwick

PHL 204/Winter 2011

01:05:2011 & 03:10:2011

9 students completed initial and final assessments.

PHL 204/Spring 2011

03:30:2011 & 06:01:2011

8 students completed both initial and final assessments

### Jolin

I distributed the survey to all the students in my 6-8:50pm Philosophy of Religion class on the first day of the Winter term, 2011, and then repeated the survey on the last day of the term prior to the scheduled day for the final exam. 22 students filled out the survey on the first day. 15 filled it out on the final day. However, only 8 of the surveys filled out on the last day were done by students who had taken it on the first day. This is apparently accounted for by patterns of class drops, class adds and absences.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

### Stockton

The majority of students (12 out of 16) enrolled in Biomedical Ethics completed the post survey demonstrating improved *communication* by utilizing ethical concepts they learned in class to more clearly articulate their own moral position. The remaining four students had positions that were virtually indistinguishable from their responses on the pre-survey.

The majority of students (10 out of 18) enrolled in Philosophy of Religion completed the post-survey demonstrating *cultural awareness* that was similar to their responses on the pre-survey. Seven students had responses that were deemed an improvement and one student had a response that was deemed inferior. Responses were judged on their depth of consideration, moral nuance, and empathetic sensitivity.

### Farnum

In the M/W class, I saw that 3 out of 9 surveys showed a change in the way they approached the ethical dilemma by using terms and concepts from the ethical theories we discussed in class. In my T/TH class, I saw that 6 out of 13 surveys showed a change in the way they approached the ethical dilemma by using terms and concepts from the ethical theories we discussed in class. The rest of the surveys didn't incorporate directly any ethical theory terms/concepts into their answers, but it did appear that some of the answers were a bit longer and more thought out. The remaining answers (about one third) were pretty much the same.

### Warwick

Inconclusive. But there's evidence of increasing awareness of the subjective nature of religious positions and that some more "objective" standard, i.e. the law and its insistence on fairness, should prevail in this decision. Since I interpreted the idea of 'culture' here to be represented by the religious community and its ideas, and the secular community and its largely scientific perspective (contrast a theocracy and a secular democracy) I think that epistemological distinction, emphasized throughout my course, is arguably evident in the students' responses and is argued more forcefully in their second response.

### Jolin

On the basis of comparing the 8 relevant surveys: Four students appeared to have gained in one way or another in the ability to manifest cultural awareness in the sense assumed in the test question. Three showed no real change during the term. One student seemed to do worse.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### Stockton

These findings suggest that philosophy continues to be a strong discipline for enriching communication and developing a greater sense of engagement by students toward the world that they live in. The fulfillment of *communication* and *cultural awareness* as learning outcomes is essentially insatiable. Within philosophy as a discipline, it is a matter of what degree we can further perpetuate the development of these skills. The findings from this assessment point toward loose support for our work, but do not provide any real quantifiable data to suggest that we are as successful at our instruction as we think we are. For this reason, we should continue to take strides attempting to better measure these outcomes as a basis for pedagogical enrichment.

### Farnum

I think this exercise showed that some of the students were able to demonstrate an improvement in their ability to communicate using complex ethical terms/concepts. The ones who incorporated theoretical concepts into their answers to the dilemma given were able to show a broader linguistic approach when communicating their position than they did at the beginning of the term. I did not prompt the students to incorporate the theories in their answers, so the ones that did integrate the ethical theory concepts did so on their own (based on the written directions alone).

### Warwick

There was some suggestion in the data of an awareness that religious points of view were highly subjective and beyond evaluation and this seemed to necessitate a hands-off/fairness attitude towards religion. This seemed to lead them to their conclusion that the project should go ahead (or, if not, then no religious institutions should build here) and this did seem to reflect our study of the epistemology of religious beliefs (the intended core concern of this course).

### Jolin

Given the small number of relevant surveys, and the fact that the test question did not very well relate to the content of my course (I did not alter the course content to address the test question), I believe that little of substance can be drawn from the test. However, the exercise of developing the test, administering it, and seeing the results was a valuable learning experience for planning future assessment efforts. I've listed some of the main things I learned, in my response to the question below.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING ASSESSMENT

### Stockton

- The concept of measuring *cultural awareness* needs to be collectively revisited and more clearly defined.
- The possibility of giving instructors flexibility on how to assess has been discussed. If this is done, there should be some degree of connectivity between parallel efforts that is expressly agreed upon.
- Consider using some formative assessment strategies that allow for students to self-assess and report on their own observations.

### Farnum

I think that next time, if we were to use this technique, I would verbally prompt the students to use ethical theories and their concepts in the answers they give. That way, I can assess not only the quantity of those who included these concepts into their answers, but then I can start to think about quality as well. However, once I go in that direction, perhaps evaluating artifacts from the summative assessment techniques I already give my students could serve that purpose. All in all, I think the process of assessing for specific outcomes might be a difficult process if separated from the context of the course, so some further refinement of the assessment tools would be warranted. I think that the very fact that multiple instructors have done the same procedure is beneficial for the Philosophy SAC and will lead to further discussion among colleagues which is always positive, in my experience.

### Warwick

I think that instructors should devise their own questions that reflect the particular core concerns of their courses. I certainly felt that this question did not, without a stretch (i.e., interpreting cultural awareness in terms of distinguishing religious cultures from secular and science based cultures), offer much opportunity to draw out relevant concepts we encountered through my course, despite my attempts to direct the students to particular aspects of the question (e.g. How should a secular law-based society react to the needs of faith-based communities?) that might have connected with epistemological concerns. I agree with Steve that we should delay setting the first assessment until week 2 to allow for drops etc.

### Jolin

For next time, I would consider doing the following:

1. Continue with the brief pre- and post-test design for the assessment. In itself, that seems manageable, acceptable to the students, and potentially informative.
2. If possible, wait for a class period or two to administer the pre-test. This would ensure a higher level of completed tests from students likely to be in the class at the end. Likewise, try to administer the post-test on a day close to the end of the class when attendance is likely to be high. The aim of these arrangements would be to maximize the number of relevant surveys for comparison at the end.
3. Perhaps the most important change indicated would be to design the test question to reflect some legitimate sense of the PCC goal in question (e.g., cultural awareness) that would actually be addressed in the particular course content of the class as taught, or intended to be taught, by the instructor administering the test. If some department oversight were desired, to ensure reasonable department-wide consistency, a review of test questions proposed by individual

instructors could be made part of a SAC meeting discussion prior to the administration of the assessment test.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING STUDENT LEARNING**

### Stockton

- Be explicit and transparent about learning outcomes as they pertain to PCC's Core Outcomes and course activities.
- Provoke reflection in students about the ambiguity of these concepts and what they mean to them.
- Facilitate greater classroom interaction between students by not allowing them to regularly group into familiar relationships.

### Farnum

There were not a lot of changes to the way I think about teaching ethics to non-philosophers by participating in this exercise. It is a difficult process to test the changes in the student's ability to incorporate ethical theory into their way of communicating answers to ethical dilemmas. I still think that I can observe significant changes in the class discussion from the first day of class to the end of the term. However, I am still not sure how to best capture this change on paper. It is definitely clear to me that students in my classes achieve the desired outcomes when I assess each class's progress throughout the term by using a variety of assessment techniques: formative "discussion based" assessment strategies (e.g., asking students questions, listening to their answers, having them ask me and other classmates questions, etc.), written summative assessment tools like papers and essay exams, and other informal techniques that I use outside of class time (e.g., office hour conversations and after class conversations). The most beneficial aspect of the process has been talking to other instructors about their perspectives on assessment, so perhaps a more "best practices" focus and discussion would be more beneficial to improving teaching and learning at PCC.

### Warwick

Just as I believe individual instructors should devise their own questions, we should also, without undue influence, arrange to emphasize those aspects of the course that we thought important enough to construct our questions to test. But we probably all do that anyhow already. The tail should not wag the dog.

### Jolin

With respect to student learning, what I took from this first experiment is perhaps nothing more than a reminder of an old lesson: if you want someone to learn something, you generally have to directly address it in your teaching. Serendipity and the techniques of indirection can take you only so far. As a teacher, I did take from this experiment some encouragement to think seriously about the way that my courses relate to both personal and institutional learning goals, and about how adjustments in either the courses or in the interpretation and articulation of those goals might be called for.