

Ideas and Approaches to General Education Goal 1 (effective communication) for High-Seat Distributive Courses

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This guide is intended as a primer for faculty and programs looking for ways to incorporate Goal 1 SLOs into high-seat courses. In small-seat courses (25 or fewer) the goal of effective communication (Goal 1 in our general education curriculum) can be handled by assigning essays or other long-form written work for which faculty can provide substantive feedback. In the new general education curriculum, many high-seat courses (30 or more) must also begin to teach students to communicate effectively. This can present a dilemma for distributive courses (such as science distributives) that must submit to CAPC revised course designs that demonstrate instruction in effective communication.

The approaches described in this document are a small collection of suggestions for handling effective communication in high seat courses, and the suggestions provided here are by no means exhaustive. Most certainly, there are other nuanced and effective approaches to teaching students to become effective communicators happening all across our curriculum. Please feel free to utilize the strategies here as needed or desired. If you have questions, concerns, or inquiries please contact chair of the CAPC General Education committee as needed, Dr. Carol Smith (CSmith3@wcupa.edu).

SLO 1.A Express oneself effectively in common college-level written forms.

This student learning outcome might take place across both formal and informal writing assignments. Common college-level written forms might be an essay, or a written exam question, a lab report, or another written work relevant to the field or discipline under study. Some ideas for teaching effective expression in college-level written forms for high-seat courses:

- ✚ If assigning a written form like a lab report to 30+ students, faculty might focus commentary on communicative effectiveness on just one section of the report. For example, if students will submit four lab reports over the course of the semester, faculty might focus commentary explicitly on the effectiveness of the introduction section in report one, the methods section in report two, the results section in report three, and the discussion section in report four.
- ✚ Faculty might also use an audit approach to assessing written forms in high-seat courses. For example, in a course of 60 students that has three written form assignments faculty might randomly audit 20 students for in-depth commentary on effectiveness for assignment one, another 20 for assignment,

and the final 20 for assignment three. In this model, all students should submit all three assignments for assessment, but only 20 are assessed for effective communication at one time, thereby making the commentary manageable.

- ✚ In courses with mathematical content, equations may be considered as a common college-level form that allows students to express an idea. Faculty might ask students to follow a mathematical expression with a written explanation of its meaning as a sign of communicative effectiveness.

SLO 1.B Revise and improve writing and/or presentations

Revision is at the heart of learning to communicate effectively, and is the primary way that students learn to hone their communicative skills, written or otherwise. In fact, opportunity for revision is required in writing-emphasis courses all of which address Goal 1. In high-seat courses required revision can be difficult to manage. Here are some approaches faculty might consider:

- ✚ Have students submit multiple versions of a short writing. If students are assigned to demonstrate their communication of a class concept in short-form, such as a 250 word summary, then a reasonable amount of class time can be spent facilitating peer commentary on student writing. Faculty can also provide a short lecture on summary writing. Students can be asked to revise their work based on peer commentary and class lecture, but should submit two or more versions of the work: the original, a first revision, and a final revision.
- ✚ Require students to choose just one assignment for revision. This required revision can be a stand-alone grade (i.e. 10 points) or the original grade can be improved based on the revision. To stagger the grading load, faculty can dictate that a revised work must be submitted with two weeks of receiving a grade, thereby assuring that faculty will not receive all revisions in the final weeks of the semester.

SLO 1.C Express one-self effectively in presentations

Presentations can come in a variety of forms including in-class presentations, demonstrations, produced videos, slides, websites, or other multimedia works.

- ✚ For courses that utilize student presentations, faculty might create a mechanism for peer and instructor feedback on student presentations (i.e. what is confusing about this presentation?) and students can be asked to submit a revision of their presentation materials based on peer and instructor feedback from the presentation itself.
- ✚ Faculty teaching courses that utilize presentations in course work can consider how modes (to inform, to persuade, to entertain) lead to varying interpretations of effectiveness. Faculty and peers can use these modes as a basis for critiquing student effectiveness in presentations in real-time

(critiques made during the presentation) or post-facto (student presentations are recorded and analyzed).

- ✚ Faculty might also utilize presentations in the learning process by diving course concepts into components and assigning students to present on the function of that component. For example, in a course instructing students on cell Biology, different students can be assigned to present on different functions or components of the cell under study. This work helps the student and class learn about course content, while creating an opportunity for the instructor to correct misunderstandings or misconceptions in class or lab.
- ✚ Assign Scenario Writing: Students have an opportunity to grapple more deeply with a complex topic when they have to perform deontic critical thinking, or determine an action to be taken in response to a scenario. For these informal writings, students can be given a course-related scenario and asked to write about how they would address the scenario. This can be done through in class or out of class writing. Class discussion about their planned actions can elucidate complexities or factors relating to a course concept that students may need to better understand; hence, this exercise helps them use writing to more deeply learn about course concepts by applying their knowledge to scenarios.

SLO 1.D Demonstrate comprehension of and ability to explain information and ideas accessed through reading

It's important that faculty not confuse this objective with reading comprehension. This student learning objective requires students to “explain” the “information and ideas accessed through reading” not just to “demonstrate comprehension” of those ideas. This is an important distinction because demonstrating knowledge from reading through a multiple-choice test, would not indicate that the student can explain that information or those ideas. Here are some ideas for handling comprehension and explanation of information and ideas from reading in a high-seat course.

- ✚ Faculty that rely on exams for assessment might include a written answer question on an exam, which would require students to explain information and ideas from course readings in their own words, thereby demonstrating effective communication skills.
- ✚ Develop a writing-to-learn assignment. The idea behind writing to learn assignments is that students can use writing as a tool to better understand a course concept or task they are completing in a given course. The writing process in writing to learn scenarios is not about testing student knowledge, or requiring an extended argument; rather, writing becomes an opportunity to explore students' own thinking on a given issue and to share that thinking with peers or the professor as part of the learning process. Below are some common approaches:

- *Freewrite on course reading:* This very common informal writing strategy helps students explore a concept by moving what's in their mind to the page for closer examination. Typically, the instructor provides a question or theme upon which students will freewrite. The first goal in free-writing is continue writing until new ideas and considerations begin to emerge from the students' mind onto the page, the second goal is to have students look back at what they've written and determine what's worth formalizing and what's not.
- *One Minute Papers on Readings:* Another common informal writing, one-minute papers focus on student summary of a discussion or content covered during the class period. For these papers, the instructor typically reserves five or so minutes at the end of a period and asks students to summarize 2-3 main take-aways they have from the class as well as a carefully worded question they have about content covered. These papers are turned into instructors, and are then reviewed to determine whether students are grasping the course content as expected.
- *Journals, Logs, or Blogs on Class Readings:* Persistent reflection on course topics from readings is one of the best ways to engage students outside of the classroom for the full course of the semester. Journals or Logs can be opportunities for students to reflect informally about course content at pre-determined moments, such as daily, bi-weekly, weekly, or by periodic prompting. These reflections can be turned into the professor after each entry, at mid-term and final, at final only, or never at all. Reflections can be read to see how students' thoughts are developing or students can simply be required to share their reflections in class discussions. Blogs can act as a public-facing opportunity to reflect informally on course content as well, and this public element can encourage students to pay attention to style, grammar, and clarity more fully than they might in an informal journal reflection that won't face public scrutiny.
- *Narration of a Process:* Researchers in cognitive science and linguistics have theorized that our conceptual systems of understanding are largely based on story-telling and comparison-making. That is, human thinking tends to happen in terms of narrative and metaphor. One way to help students learn course content, and to measure lapses in understanding course content is to assign a narration of a process. Students can be asked to characterize the key components of a process, and explain that process through a short story or narrative. For example, Chemistry students might be asked to narrate the process of free radical formation wherein atoms, molecules, ions, electrons, and other components get characterized as students work to tell the story of that process. Faculty can directly

assess these narratives to see where students are lacking in understanding about a process, or narratives can be shared with peers in class to affirm, deny, and moderate understandings of a process. These informal writings help students demonstrate their ability to explain content from course readings, and often lead to excellent clarifying questions for the instructor.

- *Metaphor and Analogy Exercises:* Like narrative, students must understand a concept completely in order to draw comparisons to other objects or concepts. Asking students to reflect through informal writing on a good metaphor, or asking students to explore that metaphor through an extended written analogy can be an excellent way to encourage high-order thinking about a course concept. For example, Education students can be asked to determine a metaphor for the teacher-parent or teacher-student relationship. Sharing these metaphors or analogies as a class can reveal productive and unproductive ways of conceptualizing important relationships in a field of study.

These approaches are by no means exhaustive, and there are most certainly many nuanced and effective approaches to teaching students to become effective communicators happening all across our curriculum. Please feel free to crib these ideas as needed or desired. If you have questions, concerns, or inquiries about incorporating writing into coursework as a means to teach effective communication or critical thinking, please feel free to contact me as needed:

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If you have questions about the CAPC process or the new general education curriculum requirements, please contact CAPC General Education Committee chair

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