

Criminology, Law & Society C7 Assessment Project Donna Schuele and Jennifer Robinson

Project Description

This project builds off of work begun in 2006-2007 to revamp and revitalize the Criminology, Law & Society Department's lower-division course, C7 Introduction to Criminology, Law & Society. This course is offered every quarter and during summer sessions. Class size during the academic year is 400 students, ranging from freshmen to seniors. This course serves a number of purposes and a wide audience:

- as an required course for CLS majors to prepare them for upper division CLS courses, yet the course is not enforced as a prerequisite and thus CLS majors can take the course at any point in their coursework;
- as a required school-wide course in the School of Social Ecology to provide an overview of topics in criminology, law and society, although non-CLS SE students may or may not take any upper division courses that would draw on C7 curriculum; and
- as a general education course for any student in any major who is interested in learning about criminology, law & society.

The revision was undertaken by an ad hoc committee chaired by Department Chair Bill Thompson, which included Jennifer Robinson. The revision was motivated by a number of factors and concerns:

- there was concern that this course had developed a reputation as an easy course and that students may have been taking the course not so much out of an interest in the subject but rather to get an easy grade;
- the course had often been taught by adjuncts and there was little oversight regarding the curriculum, thus the curriculum tended to vary by instructor particularly with regard to the balance between criminology and law and society and with regard to rigor;
- the variations in curriculum and rigor led to an uneven preparation of our CLS majors for upper-division courses and an inability on the part of instructors of upper-division courses to be able to assume certain knowledge and skills.

The revisions included developing a somewhat uniform core curriculum for the course that centered around three themes: law making, law breaking, and the justice system, themes that were meant to provide an even balance between criminology and law and society topics. Student learning outcomes related to these themes were developed. In addition, a core group of experienced faculty was recruited to regularly teach the course. Finally, the rigor of the course was increased substantially. The reading load was increased and a writing component was introduced to supplement multiple-choice exams.

The purpose of the Assessment Project was to begin an on-going evaluation of the revisions to C7, to determine not only whether the goals of the ad hoc committee were being met, but also to begin to consider broader issues such as:

- the place of C7 in the CLS curriculum;
- how our various course offerings fit together in what has heretofore been faculty-centered curriculum development;
- student learning outcomes for the major and then for the various upper-division courses;
- how we might move towards student-centered curriculum development; and
- how the department could build in sustainable assessment without additionally burdening faculty.

Progress Report and Preliminary Findings

The revamped C7 was unveiled in Fall 2007, and has been offered approximately 8 times since then. Formal assessment of the course began with the Winter 2009 offering, and will continue at least through Spring 2009 and Fall 2009. The starting points for the assessment were:

- informal reports from faculty who had taught the revamped course up through Fall 2008;
- training received by Donna Schuele and Jennifer Robinson at a conference sponsored by WASC focusing on student-centered learning in September 2008; and
- Donna Schuele's experience team-teaching the course with Bill Thompson in Winter 2009.

Broader issues of curricular development were addressed beginning in Fall 2008 with the establishment of a curriculum committee, which began formulating student learning outcomes for the major that were consistent with the already-established student learning outcomes for C7.

The C7 assessment currently has three components:

- three focus group meetings
- an on-line survey assessing each reading assignment
- a full-class survey conducted on the day of the final exam.

These components, and particularly the full-class survey, were designed based on preliminary formal (student course evaluations) and informal feedback prior to Winter 2009. Student course evaluations during the first year of the revamped course indicated that the new version was not being well-received. Instructors indicated that the ratings were well below what they usually received.

Focus group

Twenty students are selected from a larger group who volunteer, and selection is based on midterm exam scores so that there is representation across the achievement levels. The group meets three times, during weeks 9 and 10 and finals week, and student feedback is solicited regarding lectures, readings, and writing assignments and multiple-choice exams. The focus group students then complete the on-line survey asking for in-depth feedback on each reading assignment, and recommend whether to retain the assignment in the curriculum, drop the assignment, or retain with reservation. For the Winter 2009 focus group, two students were designated to review textbooks for possible adoption in Fall 2009.

Full-class survey

The full-class survey was designed to address a number of concerns:

- **audience:** the survey was designed to get a better sense of our audience and to determine how well we are serving the different needs of these somewhat disparate groups. In particular, we were interested in determining whether CLS majors are indeed experiencing this course as a prerequisite to upper-division CLS courses, or whether they are fitting this course in after they have taken upper-division courses, which would defeat the preparatory purpose of this course;
- **student dissatisfaction:** The department was concerned to discern the source of dissatisfaction and considered the following possibilities:
 - that students' expectations about the course were based on information about the old version and thus the dissatisfaction resulted from surprise;
 - that the course was serving the expectations and needs of a certain part of the student population but not other parts (e.g., CLS majors v. nonmajors);
 - that the course (including lectures, reading, and assignments) was being pitched at too difficult a level for lower-division students, CLS majors or otherwise;
 - that the reading load was too substantial for a lower-division course; and/or
 - that the assignments and exams were not appropriately assessing student achievement, thus leading to student frustration.

Findings

The Winter 2009 focus group provided valuable feedback and had the added bonus of creating goodwill. Students were forthcoming about their experiences in the course, took their task seriously, and reacted positively that their opinion was being sought. They raised interesting issues that might not have come out but for this setting. For example, in discussing the difficulty of the course, some students indicated that they found they had brought "myths" about criminology and the legal system into the course, and that part of the learning experience was to discover and discard those myths. The instructors had been operating from the viewpoint that most all of the students came into the course at least having taken a high school government course, but had ignored the effect that media and other sources may have had on constructing incorrect views of the subject matter. Because this information came out early in the focus group meetings, we were able to design the full-class survey to test whether this happened to be a concern just of the focus group students or of the entire class. The focus group also generally voted in favor of adopting a textbook for the course. As a result of this finding, the Fall 2009 course will adopt a textbook (although a different one than the two reviewed by students.)

The readings survey revealed other interesting results. Both the focus group and the full class indicated that the reading load was too heavy. However, when asked about individual readings, the focus group voted to eliminate very few. It will be a challenge to adjust the reading load so that students feel less overwhelmed, and integrate a textbook at the same time.

The full-class survey of the Winter 2009 students revealed a number of findings:

- only about one-fifth of the students are or will be CLS majors; thus the majority of students in this course may never take another course that requires the knowledge learned in C7;
- for students who are CLS majors, they are able to get into the course fairly early in their major: for just over 70%, it is the first course they are taking and nearly 70% of CLS majors believe that the course provides at least some preparation for upper-division CLS courses; thus the course is indeed serving as a prerequisite;
- nearly 70% of students were freshmen and sophomores, thus the course does attract a lower-division audience;
- 80% of students believed that the reading load was too high for a lower-division course;
- nearly 65% of students viewed the writing assignments favorably, but over half of the students did not view the midterm multiple choice exam as a good measure of what they had learned; this finding supported the ad hoc committee's decision to institute a writing component in the course but calls for an examination of our multiple choice testing;
- over half of the students agreed that they had brought some myths to the course and that at least three-fourths of the material that they learned was brand new to them, indicating that the focus group's concern was representative and indicating that the high school government course (which over 90% of students had taken) may not provide the preparation that C7 instructors expect;
- only a third of students had heard about the course from another student prior to taking it, and it appears that the "surprise dynamic" (where students have heard about the earlier, less rigorous version of the course and bring the wrong expectations into the revamped version) is somewhat but not a strong factor (only 12% of these students had heard about the "easier version" of the course, although 23% reported hearing that the course was easy);
- finally, we were heartened that over half of the students reported that they would recommend the course to a non-CLS major who was interested in learning about the law, the American legal system and criminology.

Recommendations for Sustainable Assessment of the Undergraduate Curriculum in a Faculty-Centered Environment

"In my humble opinion," there are a number of steps that a research university can take to sustain assessment of undergraduate programs:

- if the department chair is committed to assessment, the faculty will be more committed;
- if the department has on board one or more faculty members (most likely PSOEs and SOEs) whose focus is primarily undergraduate education, these faculty members can spearhead long-term and on-going assessment (adjunct lecturers, whose position in the university is more tenuous, are not in as good a position to fill this role);
- the department should staff its curriculum committee with faculty committed to and experienced with undergraduate education, and the department chair should signal that service on this committee is valued in the department;
- the curriculum committee should developed student learning outcomes for the major and provide the initial development of SLOs for various courses which can then be built upon by the specific faculty members who teach those courses;
- the department should be willing to consider elimination of courses that might showcase a faculty member's work but do not fit well into the curriculum (perhaps as measured by whether the course addresses the SLOs in the major); and
- the department should be willing to develop a core curriculum in its lower-division prerequisite courses while allowing some leeway for academic freedom to mold the course to the particular instructor's strengths and interests, so that students are receiving uniform and predictable preparation for upper-division courses.

C7 Assessment Survey

The CLS department is conducting an on-going assessment of C7 and would appreciate your help in making this a better course. Please provide answers to the questions below on the scantron provided.

1. I am taking C7 because:

- a) I am or will be a CLS major.
- b) I am or will be in the School of Social Ecology, but not a CLS major.
- c) I am fulfilling a general education requirement.
- d) Other

If you are a CLS major or are planning to be a CLS major, answer Questions 2, 3 and 4. Otherwise, skip to question 5.

2. If a CLS major or future major, did you attempt to enroll in C7 during one or more earlier quarters but were unable to get into the course due to high enrollment?

- a) Yes
- b) No

3. If a CLS major or future major, how many CLS courses did you take prior to enrolling in C7 (do not count courses you are taking this quarter)?

- a) None
- b) 1-3
- c) 4-6
- d) More than 6

4. If a CLS major or future major, do you feel that C7 has prepared you for upper-division CLS courses?

- a) A lot
- b) Somewhat
- c) A little
- d) Not at all

5. Please check which applies:

- a) I am taking this course for the first time.
- b) I am taking this course again, having dropped it before.
- c) I am taking this course again, due to an earlier low grade.
- d) Other

6. Please check which applies:

- a) I am taking this course for a letter grade.
- b) I am taking this course pass/fail.

7. Please check which applies:

- a) I attended an American high school and took a non-AP/non-honors government course.
- b) I attended an American high school and took an AP or honors government course.
- c) I attended an American high school but did not take a government course.
- d) I did not attend an American high school.
- e) Other.

8. Are you a transfer student to UCI?

- a) Yes
- b) No

If you are a transfer student, please answer Question 9. If you are not a transfer student, please skip to Question 10.

9. If you are a transfer student, how many law and society, criminology, or other law-related courses did you take at your previous college/university?

- a) None
- b) One
- c) More than one, but did not take a law-related major.
- d) Many; I had a law-related major.

10. Current year at UCI:

- a) 1st
- b) 2nd
- c) 3rd
- d) 4th or above

11. Academic year that you plan to graduate with your bachelor's degree (summer is considered to be at the end of the academic year):

- a) 2008-2009
- b) 2009-2010
- c) 2010-2011
- d) 2011-2012
- e) 2012-2013

12. Compared to other lower division courses that you have taken, the reading load for C7 has been:
- a) Much higher
 - b) Somewhat higher
 - c) About the same
 - d) Somewhat lower
 - e) Much lower

Please assess whether the following assignments were a good measure of what you learned in C7:

13. Midterm exam?

- a) Yes
- b) No

14. Final exam?

- a) Yes
- b) No

15. Media essays?

- a) Yes
- b) No

16. Looking back, do you feel that you entered this course with mistaken ideas (or “myths”) about the law, the American legal system, and/or criminology?

- a) A lot
- b) Somewhat
- c) A little
- d) Not at all

17. Looking back, how much of the material that you learned in this class was brand new?

- a) All or nearly all
- b) About 75%
- c) About 50%
- d) About 25%
- e) None or almost none.

18. Would you recommend C7 to someone who is not a CLS major but interested in learning about the law, the American legal system, and criminology?

- a) Yes
- b) No

19. Before starting the course, did you get information about C7 from another student who had already taken the course?

- a) Yes
- b) No

If you answered YES, answer Questions 20, 21 and 22. If NO, you’re done!

20. If yes, what did you hear about the difficulty of the course?

- a) That it was easy.
- b) That it was hard.
- c) Other

21. If yes, when did that other student take the course?

- a) In 2007-08 or Fall 2008 (last year or this year)
- b) In Summer 2007 or earlier (before last year)
- c) Don’t know

22. If yes, to what degree did this information affect your decision to take the course?

- a) A lot
- b) Somewhat
- c) A little
- d) Not at all

Thank you for your help. We hope that you enjoyed the course!