

Assessment of Student Learning in the Undergraduate Minor in Educational Studies Final Report 2014

Project Lead: Judith H. Sandholtz, Professor, School of Education
Graduate Student Researcher: Sarah Gilliland, School of Education

Background

The undergraduate minor in Educational Studies attracts undergraduates from a variety of majors and career interests, and graduates over 300 students annually. Prior to our first assessment grant, the program had not developed learning outcomes or a mode of overall assessment. Our goals for 2014 built on our accomplishments from 2011-2013. During 2011-2012, we developed five learning outcomes for the program and initiated assessments for two of those outcomes. During 2012-13 we continued our assessment of student writing and initiated assessment of a third learning outcome. The undergraduate minor in Educational Studies does not include a capstone course, and students do not all take the same series of courses (students select three out of the seven core courses); thus, in addition to developing learning outcomes, we had to identify the most appropriate courses in which to embed our assessments. Our five learning outcomes are as follows:

1. Students will use critical thinking and problem solving in effective oral and written communication about educational issues.
2. Students will demonstrate an understanding of how learning and teaching occur and how issues of educational inequality in American public schools impact these processes.
3. Students will contextualize educational issues historically, socially, culturally, organizationally, and politically.
4. Students will analyze and apply educational theories, strategies, and research in fieldwork settings and consider impacts on learning and development.
5. Students will become critical consumers of educational research.

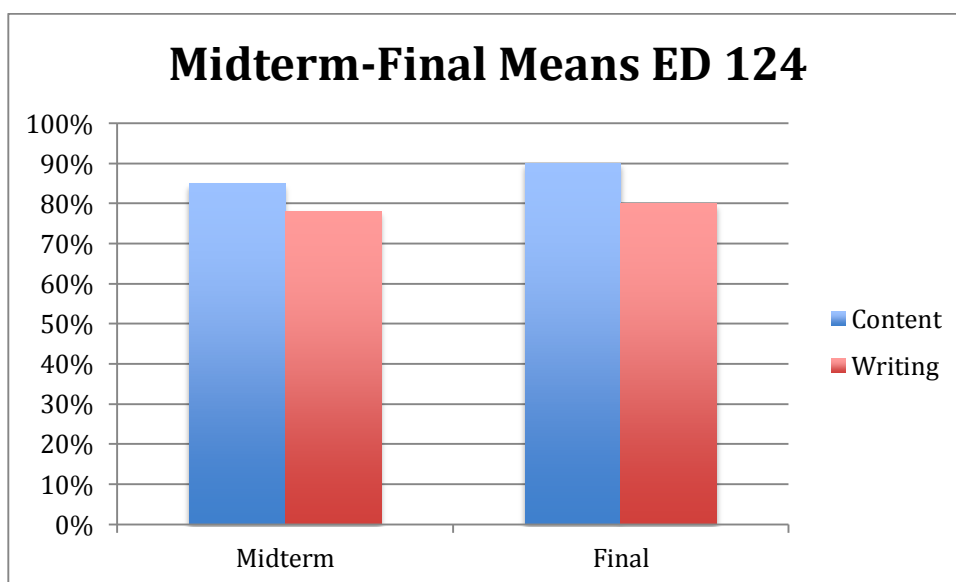
Our grant proposal outlined four primary goals for 2014: 1) developing and pilot testing embedded assessments for learning outcomes #2 and #4; 2) pilot testing the two revised common writing rubrics across courses (learning outcome #1); 3) using our findings from the pilot tests to finalize the writing rubrics and embedded assessments; and 4) analyzing strategies for making our assessment of learning outcomes an ongoing, sustainable process. By the end of 2014, we aimed to have embedded assessments for each of our five learning outcomes and writing rubrics that can be used across undergraduate courses in the Educational Studies minor, and we accomplished that overall aim. In the following sections, we describe our specific accomplishments.

Assessment of Learning Outcome #2: Students will analyze issues of educational inequality in American public schools.

Our first goal for the 2014 year was to pilot test an embedded assessment in ED 124 (Multicultural Education in K-12 Schools) for learning outcome #2 (Students will analyze issues of educational inequality in American public schools). We identified ED 124 as the ideal course in which to embed this assessment because the course content addressed topics relevant to the learning outcome and the course was one of the core courses commonly taken by students in the minor. We convened a committee of the primary instructors of ED 124 during Winter 2014 to develop the assessment and rubric. One of the challenges of addressing this outcome in ED 124 was the diversity of teaching approaches to ED 124. However, in committee discussions, the faculty members not only developed the assessment and rubric, but also identified common themes across the different sections of ED 124 and shared instructional materials. For the assessment, instructors asked students to read a current events article related to inequalities in K-12 education selected by the instructor and to evaluate the author's argument in relation to their course readings. The committee designed the rubric to assess the following dimensions of the students' work: 1) description of the issue in the article, 2) description of the author's argument, 3) evaluation of the author's argument, and 4) writing clarity and presentation.

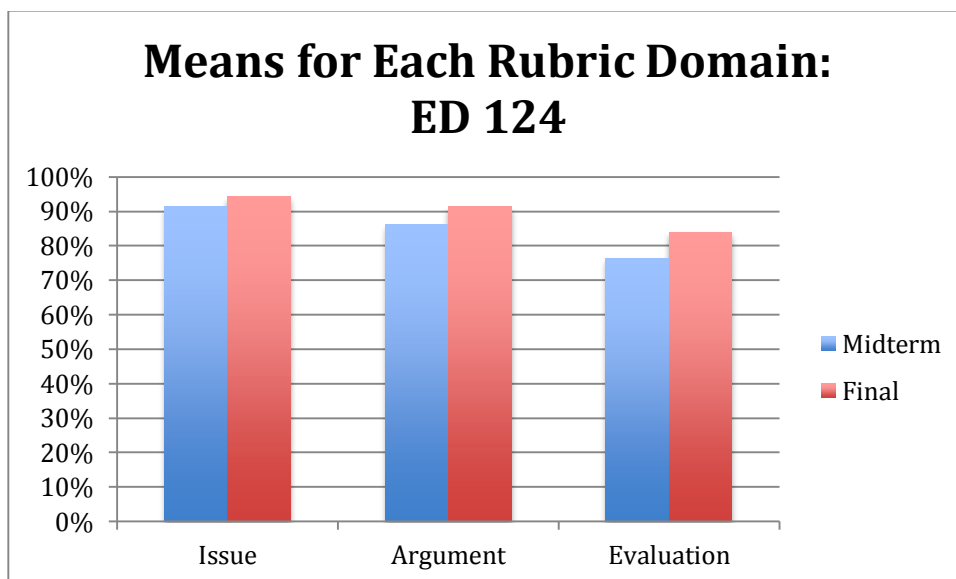
We first pilot tested the assessment as a midterm assignment in the two Spring 2014 sections of ED 124. The teaching assistants and instructor completed the scoring of the midterm assignment. The instructor then repeated the assessment (using a different article) as the final examination in both Spring 2014 sections of ED 124. The class mean for the content (description, argument and evaluation) was 85% at midterm and 90% at the final. The class mean for writing was 78% at midterm and 80% at final. Not only were the students' writing scores consistently lower than their content scores, but the students also demonstrated a significant improvement in content scores from midterm to final, but not in writing.

The following graph represents the class means on the assessment of learning outcome #2 at midterm and final of Spring 2014.



We also analyzed the students' performance within the three content domains of the rubric (identifying the issue, identifying the author's argument, and evaluating the argument). Students consistently scored better at identifying the issue compared to evaluating the argument. This finding suggests that students continue to have more difficulty with the higher level analysis required to evaluate the author's argument.

The following graph demonstrates the score breakdown by section on the rubric for the assessment of learning outcome #2.



The committee work for this learning outcome not only resulted in the creation of an assessment that instructors can easily embed within the course, but the discussions also led to more collaboration among the instructors. The instructors for ED 124 had initially expressed resistance at trying to develop a common outcome for a course in which individual instructors exercised freedom in pedagogical approach. The committee discussions allowed the instructors to share ideas for course content and readings and led to agreement on the design of a common assessment that was relevant to all sections of the course.

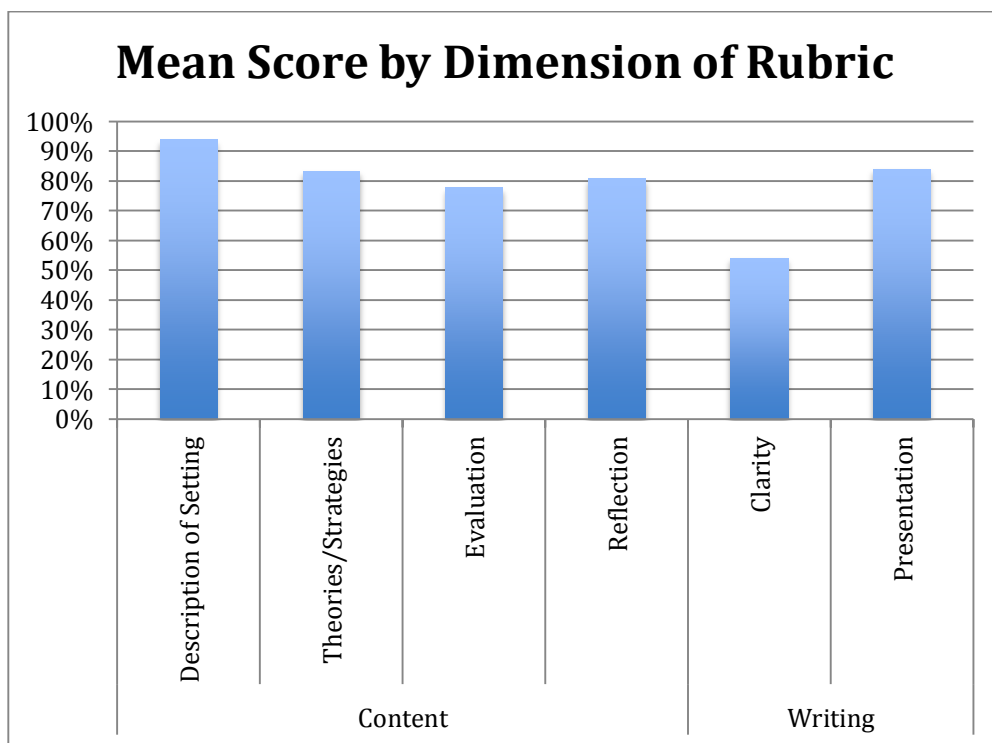
Assessment of Learning Outcome #4: Students will analyze and apply educational theories, strategies and research in fieldwork settings, and consider impacts on learning and development.

Prior to designing an assessment for students' fieldwork experiences, we analyzed the pathways students could take to complete their fieldwork requirement. Students are required to complete 40 hours of fieldwork to complete the minor in Educational Studies; however, students have several options for completing these hours. We identified three primary ways through which students could complete their requirement: 1) fieldwork embedded within a content course, 2) working as a research assistant (ED 198) or peer teaching assistant (ED 199), or 3) working independently off campus (and submitting a verification form signed by their supervisor). We then assembled a committee of faculty who teach courses with significant fieldwork components (both embedded in content courses and through ED 199).

The committee began by reviewing assignments used to evaluate students' fieldwork participation in courses that contained embedded fieldwork experiences. Drawing on components of these existing assignments, the committee designed a reflection paper to be used as an assignment in ED 198 and ED 199 courses. The assignment prompted students to write a paper in which they described their fieldwork setting, identified teaching/learning/developmental theories and/or strategies they had learned about in courses, and evaluated the effectiveness of the strategies in their specific settings. The students were also asked to reflect on how their fieldwork experience had affected them and their view of education. The committee also designed a rubric for scoring the assessment. The rubric contained four dimensions for scoring the students' papers: 1) description of the fieldwork setting, 2) description of theories or strategies, 3) use of evidence for the evaluation of the theories/strategies, and 4) reflection on learning. Additionally all papers were scored using the common writing rubric for writing clarity and presentation. We initially pilot tested the assessment with students in one section of ED 198 (research assistants) during Winter 2014 and two sections of ED 199 (peer assistants) during Spring 2014.

Across the three sections, students scored highest in describing their fieldwork settings. Within the content portion of the score, students scored lowest in evaluating the effectiveness of the strategies they described. Within the writing scores, students scored better on the technical aspect of writing presentation (appropriate formatting and layout) than they did in writing clarity (appropriate wording and sentence structure).

The following graph demonstrates the score breakdown by domain on the rubric for the assessment of learning outcome #4 across all three sections.



From the pilot testing of the assessment for learning outcome #4, we determined that the writing prompt needed to be modified for the different settings in which students may complete their fieldwork. The initial prompt worked well for students completing fieldwork in classroom settings, yet was less applicable for students completing fieldwork through research. Our pilot assessment also only evaluated students completing their fieldwork through ED 198 or ED 199. We need further assessment and comparison of the reflections of students completing their fieldwork independently compared to completing it within a content course. Finally, we currently have no means of assessing student learning for students completing fieldwork by independently submitting hours. Our pilot work with the assessment of learning outcome #4 has opened the conversation regarding issues of students completing fieldwork with minimal connections to their coursework.

Writing Rubrics

During 2014 we continued our refinement and implementation of the common writing rubrics. We initially developed the rubrics in 2011-12 and completed revisions and further pilot testing during 2012-13. The revisions in 2012-13 resulted in the development of two rubrics, one for longer papers (focused on structure and idea development) and one for shorter assignments (focused on writing clarity and presentation). We have now used the short writing rubric with all of the embedded assessments throughout 2012-2014. Course instructors who initially pilot tested the rubrics have now integrated the writing clarity and presentation elements of the rubrics into their course assignments. The use of a common tool for assessing students' writing has enabled instructors and teaching assistants to easily score student writing on a variety of assignments and has created consistency in the assessment of students' writing across courses. The use of the standardized rubrics has revealed that students could improve in writing clarity across courses and assignments. This finding has prompted discussion of ways that the program can better support students in the development of their writing skills specific to education.

Fall Retreat

In October 2014 we gathered the undergraduate faculty members who had participated in the assessment project over the three years of our grant funding. We used this retreat to review the progress of the assessment project for the undergraduate minor and to discuss means of sustainability.

Our 2014 assessment of learning outcome #4 (Students will analyze and apply educational theories, strategies and research in fieldwork settings, and consider impacts on learning and development.) prompted discussion of the issues related to student completion of fieldwork outside of organized course settings. The group raised several ideas, including removing or modifying the allowance to sign-off on outside fieldwork, to better promote integration of the fieldwork participation and content learning. These ideas may be incorporated into the fieldwork requirement for the new major in Education Science.

The group also discussed the students' mediocre writing performance and considered strategies to address student writing. One faculty member suggested the development of a

graduate student research project focused on interventions for undergraduate writing. The incorporation of undergraduate writing support within a graduate student project might allow funding to support this avenue of writing development and data collection. Other suggestions included a proposal to develop an upper division writing course within the education major to support students' development of writing skills specific to education and educational research. The faculty also considered the use of micro-writing (brief writing assignments during class) to provide students with greater opportunities to practice writing. These suggestions will be considered for the minor and may also be integrated into the new major.

Finally, the faculty discussed the sustainability of the current embedded assessments. Many of the courses taught in the undergraduate minor will be integrated into the new major. The faculty discussed possible differences in expectations for performance on the assessments for students completing the minor compared to the major. The faculty who pilot tested the assessments continue to use the assignments in their courses, so we anticipate having data available in the coming years to analyze any differences.

Ongoing Assessment/Sustainability

Developing methods of sustaining our assessment measures beyond the grant-funded years was an important goal for our program. To date, we have identified three measures of sustainability for our assessment efforts. First, all of the assessments we have developed are embedded within existing courses that students commonly take. This approach was a necessity since the minor has no capstone course. We now have assessments for all five learning outcomes embedded within core courses. Second, all of the assessments we have developed can be easily implemented by the course instructors and scored by the teaching assistants. We specifically created spreadsheets for data collection that make it easy to modify score weighting such that the instructor can weight course scores as desired and program evaluators can read the data they need from the assessment. Finally, the short writing rubric has been easily implemented by instructors and teaching assistants. This implementation allows for ongoing assessment of writing using a common tool. Overall, these strategies enable ongoing assessment data collection with minimal additional demands on course instructors.