

Annual Assessment Report

Department: Philosophy

Academic Year: 2021–2022

Date of Submission: September 15th, 2022

Department Chair: Jim Taylor

I. Response to the previous year PRC’s recommendations

Item: “Keep up the good collaborating in your department on these issues and using assessment to improve student learning.”	Response: We met a number of times last year to discuss our assessment activities, pedagogical plans to improve our students’ learning, and ways we can continue to collaborate to further the mission of our department in specific ways.
Item: “Regarding your Key Question #4, we’d encourage you to use your department meeting time (outlined in your response to previous PRC recommendations) when you’ll be discussing assessment to tackle the question of inter-grader reliability, which might lead to more confident and efficient grading.”	Response: We had three department meetings last year devoted to discussions of essay grading. In preparation for each meeting, two of us read and graded three student essays provided for us by the third colleague. That colleague also gave us the essay prompt and rubric employed (if there was one) for that assignment. During the meetings, we discussed our evaluations of each essay and the reasons for those judgments. And we talked about the degree of our inter-grader reliability as well as our levels of confidence and amount of efficiency in our grading.
Item: “We’re looking forward to seeing the major findings about Key Question #4 next year.”	Response: See below in section II B for a summary of our recent conversations about these meetings to discuss our essay grading practices and judgments.
Notes:	

II A. General Education Learning Outcome (GELO) assessment

General Education Learning Outcome	Though our multi-year assessment plan does not include a PLO assessment for the 2021–2022 academic year, it does include a GELO assessment for that year in the area of Reasoning Abstractly.
---	---

Who is in Charge /Involved?	Jim Taylor
<u>Direct Assessment Methods</u>	In the fall semester of 2021, Jim Taylor assigned two argumentative essays to the thirteen students in his Christian Apologetics (RS 103) course. This is one of the courses the philosophy department offers which students can take to get Reasoning Abstractly GE credit. Appendix A contains the instructions/prompt for the two essays and Appendix B contains the rubric I used to evaluate the essays together with the scores.
<u>Indirect Assessment Methods</u>	None.
Major Findings	In terms of percentages, 58% of the essays demonstrate high proficiency, 23% demonstrate proficiency, 15% some proficiency, and 4% no (or limited) proficiency. Our benchmark for this GELO is that 80% of our students will be at least proficient. Since 81% in this case were either proficient or highly proficient, we reached our benchmark this time around.
Closing the Loop Activities	As a department, we discussed the following two questions that concern the Reasoning Abstractly rubric: (1) how to distinguish reliably between a few minor errors and errors that are substantial or many in borderline cases and (2) whether the rubric should include something about degree of originality and complexity of valid arguments. See the “Collaboration and Communication” section below for specifics.
<p>Collaboration and Communication</p> <p>Here is a summary of our answers to the two questions stated above in “Closing the Loop Activities”: (1) We decided that, generally speaking, a “minor” error would be an error of communication or inadvertence (such as a typo or omitted word). An example would be the omission of the word ‘not’ (which would result in the argument being invalid) when the student seemed clearly to have intended to include it. On the other hand, a “substantial” error would be an error of logic that seems clearly to be a result of insufficient understanding. We realize that graders will need to exercise some discernment to distinguish between these sorts of cases. Finally, when an error that would be minor on its own is repeated a sufficient number of times, we would evaluate the work as manifesting “Some Proficiency” rather than “Proficiency,” since multiple errors suggest a deficiency of comprehension rather than a merely accidental oversight preventing adequate communication of something the student otherwise understands adequately. And drawing the line here will also require the grader to exercise discernment. (2) After some discussion, we decided that, for Reasoning Abstractly assessment purposes, we would not revise the rubric to include something about the degree of originality or complexity of the students’ arguments. Though our overall evaluation of the students’ work could be based in part on these things, the Reasoning Abstractly assessment, given the wording of the SLO, should focus only on the <i>validity</i> of the proof, argument, or line of reasoning constructed.</p>	

II B. Key Questions

Key Question	Our Key Question #4 is “How can we improve our essay-assessment processes so as to improve inter-grader reliability, communication with students, and the efficiency and effectiveness of our evaluative efforts?”
Who is in Charge/Involved?	Though Jim Taylor, as department chair, was in charge of planning the meetings at which we discussed this question, all three of us (Nelson, Taylor, and Vander Laan) participated in the conversations.
<u>Direct Assessment Methods</u>	The three of us took turns (at three different meetings) giving the other two the prompt (and rubric, if it existed) of one of our essay assignments with three anonymous student essays. And we compared our assessments of each.
<u>Indirect Assessment Methods</u>	None.
Major Findings	We found that we generally agreed on which essay was best, which was second best, and which was worst (we agreed on the ordinality of the essays). However, we did not always agree about the specific percentage or letter grade to assign to each essay (we disagreed on the cardinality of our assessments of the essays). We also discovered that one of us employs a generally somewhat narrower range of grades (not as high and not as low) as the other two.
Recommendations	On the basis of our discussions (see below) about these major findings, we are confident that our inter-grader reliability is generally high (much better than we originally feared it might be), so we decided that we don’t need to make any changes to our individual essay grading practices. But we are also glad that the conversations we had made us more aware of our individual tendencies that might account for our differences, and we will keep these tendencies in mind as we engage in our individual essay grading going forward. So, we think the conversations will likely lead to even greater reliability as a result of our heightened awareness about our individual practices.
Collaboration and Communication	
After discussion and on reflection, we decided that the differences in specific percentage or letter grade assignments are not extreme but within an acceptable range. And we determined that these differences can be explained to some extent in terms of the different grading systems we use (two of us use percentages and one uses letter grades). Moreover, we found that when we had initial disagreements, we generally came to agree with each other after subsequent reflection and further discussion. We decided that this exercise was illuminating and helpful and that we had answered the questions we originally had about our collective essay-grading practices.	

VI. Appendices

- A. Prompt and instructions used to collect the data for the Reasoning Abstractly assessment

B. Rubric used to evaluate the data for the Reasoning Abstractly assessment

Appendix A

Instructions/prompt for the essays

You are to write an argumentative essay of at least 1000 words that has the following features:

1. A thorough reconstruction in standard argument form (a list of numbered propositions starting with the premises and ending with the conclusion) of a critic's argument against a core Christian claim or doctrine), together with an explanation of the argument; and
2. A defense of this Christian claim or doctrine by means of a counterargument providing reasons to doubt or deny a premise of the critic's argument (in standard prose form rather than standard argument form).

Your reconstruction and counter-argument must be in your own words as much as possible (i.e., don't just employ my (or someone else's) formulation of the arguments).

Appendix B

Reasoning Abstractly rubric

Student Learning Outcome: Students will be able to construct valid instances of abstract reasoning.

	High Proficiency	Proficiency	Some Proficiency	No/Limited Proficiency
	The student has constructed a clearly valid proof (or argument, model, &c).	The student has constructed a proof (or argument, model, &c) that would be valid but for a few minor errors.	The student has constructed a proof (or argument, model, &c) that would be valid but for errors that are substantial or many.	The student has not constructed a proof (or argument, model, &c).
Essay #1	8	3	2	0
Essay #2	7	3	2	1
Average	7.5	3	2	.5