Assignment Design at Palo Alto College

Background and Context.................................2
Small Group Discussion Protocol......................5
Assignment Introduction...............................6
Feedback Sheet...........................................7
Assignment Design Worksheet Communication....8
Reflections...............................................9
PowerPoint slides.....................................10
Assignment Design at Palo Alto College  
Submitted by Julie McDevitt, Coordinator of Measurement & Evaluation - February 9, 2018

Palo Alto College is a community college in San Antonio, Texas, with a student enrollment of about 10,000. The College assesses student proficiency in the six Texas core curriculum core objectives of Communication, Critical Thinking, Empirical & Quantitative Skills, Personal Responsibility, Social Responsibility, and Teamwork through course-embedded “key assignments” and the subsequent rating of the resulting student work with rubrics developed by a College committee.

Yearly assessment results have indicated a significant percentage of student work that could not be rated fairly because the assignment did not prompt the students to demonstrate proficiency in one or more of the rubric criteria. To help support faculty in the design of assignments that are better-aligned to the rubrics, the College has offered seven “key assignment design working groups” modeled after the NILOA charrette process and using materials from the first assignment design toolkit. To further facilitate this improvement effort, the College decided to shift the assessment calendar back by one semester, so rather than collecting and rating student work in the fall, it will be collected this spring. The schedule change allowed faculty one semester to improve key assignments through participation in a working group.

The first group took place on June 19, 20, and 21, 2017, and was organized and facilitated by the College’s academic assessment coordinator. The group included six cross-disciplinary faculty volunteers from the areas of Math, Music, Accounting, Mexican-American Studies, Philosophy, and Biology, who met for two hours each day for three days and followed the NILOA process for participant groups: Assignment author sets up discussion (5 min); Q&A, feedback, discussion (15 min); Written feedback (5 min). Each author used feedback from the session to revise the assignment; the revised assignments were shared with the assessment coordinator and founded the College’s “key assignment” library. The library will be a valuable resource to all faculty, including adjuncts, who comprise 50% of our total faculty population. It will be a key component in addressing the difficulty the College departments experience with adequately informing and preparing adjunct faculty, who include off-campus dual credit instructors, with assessment of these institutional learning outcomes.

The second group occurred June 28-29, 2017, and was organized and facilitated by the LEAP Texas organization. Ten cross-disciplinary faculty members from various colleges and universities in San Antonio formed the design group; three of the ten participants were faculty from our College. The group focused on the Social Responsibility core objective and the assignments and student artifacts will become part of a larger statewide LEAP Texas research project, the results of which will be available later in 2018.

Three additional groups were offered by the College’s assessment coordinator (Sept. 8, Oct. 6, and Oct. 13, 2017). The format was changed slightly from the first June group based on discussion and feedback from the participants. It was determined that a one-day, three-hour
commitment was easier to schedule for busy faculty, so the groups met from 9:00 – 12:00. In that
time frame and continuing to follow the same discussion protocol, it was possible to invite four
faculty members to the design table with one assignment each. The faculty continued to be
volunteers from multiple disciplines. An additional change included the composition of the
groups: staff were invited to join the conversation in order to enrich the feedback given to faculty
through additional perspectives. The staff included librarians, advisors, tutoring leads, the service
learning coordinator, a student services data analyst, and a student services administrator.

The two most recent groups that took place on January 11, 2018, included several important
changes that the College believes further enhanced the experience for participants. Prior faculty
participants became the group facilitators, which shifted ownership of the process from the
assessment coordinator to the faculty. Also, one student participated in each group. This
important perspective was very well received by faculty, who valued the student feedback on
their assignments. Finally, two faculty members participated from San Antonio College, which is
one of five sister schools, along with Palo Alto College, that form the Alamo Community
Colleges district. The addition of our sister college colleagues expands collegiality and
collaboration between the campuses.

To date, 28 faculty members (of approximately 120 full time faculty) have participated in a
design group, as well as ten staff members, one administrator, and two students; three faculty
members have served as facilitators. Nearly all of the reflective feedback received from
participants has been positive. Faculty not only mentioned the positive insights that the cross-
disciplinary and cross-department and -college group members offered that will lead to the
heightened quality and refinement of their assignments, but also the value of the deep discussion
to their pedagogy, course curriculum and course design, in general. Many also expressed the
more system-level understanding they walked away from the group with due to the
commonalities that came to light among the disciplines, and how this awareness will ultimately
translate to a more cohesive experience for students.

The one negative feedback comment came from a faculty member whose group was unable to
deliver satisfactory design ideas for a specific aspect of the assignment: teamwork in an online
setting. The positive outcome of this comment is that it uncovered this common challenge that
many instructors face and now the College is researching ways to support faculty around the
issue. Another growing challenge faced by the assessment coordinator has been the recruitment
of faculty participants. The College feels it is essential to maintain the voluntary nature of
participation, and the hope is that as participation grows, the positive experiences will be shared
with others, prompting them to join a group. This chain reaction effect is already being seen. An
additional strategy is to be more intentional about the faculty we target, for example, those
whose assignments were deemed unassessable, or those disciplines in which there is no known
key assignment. Finally, it has also been suggested that a discipline- or department-specific
group of faculty may be effective, as well, and could prompt more faculty to get involved.
The academic assessment coordinator intends to continue organizing and offering the key assignment design working groups on a more regular basis throughout the academic year. The focus of the groups this year has been on the core objectives of Communication and Teamwork because these are the two objectives that will be assessed this spring. Future groups will most likely focus on additional core objectives. Also, the academic assessment and faculty development offices are initiating a partnership and plan to offer sessions to further support faculty in designing quality assignments. The assessment office will continue to maintain and grow the “key assignment” library, as well.
**Small Group Discussion Protocol**

**Key Assignment Design Working Group**

In small groups, each faculty will have an opportunity to share his/her assignment and receive suggestions and feedback from the group. In order for everyone to have an opportunity to give and receive feedback, we will use a timed carousel process. There will be one round for each faculty assignment. Faculty will be a “presenter” for one round and a “participant” for the other rounds.

Each round is 25 minutes.

**Introduce Assignment (5 min):**
Presenter (faculty) will introduce the assignment and provide background information such as: in what course the assignment is used, at what point in the course, pertinent information about the students in the course (majors vs. non-majors), what they find most challenging about the assignment, how it builds on earlier work and/or prepares students for more advanced work in later courses (or success beyond graduation), how it aligns with the course, program and institutional learning outcomes, your experience with the assignment to date, how you hope to strengthen it, and what kinds of feedback and suggestions you would like from others.

*Listeners*: jot down thoughts and questions but please do not interrupt the presenter, let them have their full five minutes.

**Discussion (15 min):**
The other Participants (faculty, staff, students) will respond to what they have heard, taking turns asking questions, sharing thoughts, feedback, etc. The purpose of the discussion is to help your colleague strengthen his/her assignment, so please be constructive and collegial. Also, please mind the time and allow each participant the opportunity to contribute to the discussion.

*Presenters*: listen carefully and respond to the inquiries. Think about alignment, but also think creatively about possible solutions.

**Feedback (5 min):**
Everyone: Based on the discussion, use the feedback form to give the presenter written feedback and suggestions. The Presenter can use this time to write down notes about the assignment, based on what they just heard, along with outlining next steps for revision or additional feedback.

**Brief break before next round (5 min)**
Assignment Introduction (5 minutes)
Key Assignment Design Working Group

Please provide the following information to the group about your assignment. The time allocation for this description is approximately 5 minutes.

1. Course location within the curriculum.

2. Student demographics (level, major/non-major, etc.).

3. Student motivation for taking the course.

4. Ways in which the assignment fits into the course content.

5. Proficiencies being assessed (to include Gen Ed core objectives).

6. Your experience with using the assignment.

7. Challenges students face with the assignment.

8. Questions for colleagues.
Feedback Sheet
Key Assignment Design Working Group

Assignment Name: ______________________________________________________________

Comments From: ______________________________________________________________

1. Alignment with Institutional Learning Outcome (ILO):
   - Which ILOs are addressed (or have the potential of being addressed) with this assignment?
     o Communication, Critical Thinking, Empirical & Quantitative Skills,
     o Personal Responsibility, Social Responsibility, Teamwork
   - Will students be able to fully demonstrate all criteria identified on the rubric for a particular ILO with this assignment? And/or in what ways can the assignment be “tweaked” so that students can more fully demonstrate all criteria?

2. What are the main strengths of this assignment?

3. Thinking about the assignment from the point of view of students, what questions or suggestions do you have?

4. What other suggestions and possibilities can you offer, especially in response to the author’s questions about improving the assignment?
 Assignment Design Worksheet: Communication

| Course |  
| Assignment Title |  
| Developers |  
| Assignment ID | (to be assigned) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>How does this assignment align to this rubric</th>
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<td><strong>Organization.</strong>&lt;br&gt;The student uses disciplinary conventions for organizing and presenting content.</td>
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<td><strong>Tools.</strong>&lt;br&gt;The student uses communication tools appropriately and skillfully for academic and professional contexts</td>
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Adopted from and designed by Dr. Chris Duke.
Reflections
Key Assignment Design Working Group

1. What was this process like for you? What ideas are you taking away?

2. What insights do you have about effective assignments?

3. What will you do next and what would help you do that?

4. How can others be brought into this work or benefit from it? What is most important to share?

5. How can we entice and excite faculty to think differently about key assignments and assessment?

6. What are your perceptions / what did you gain from cross-disciplinary discussion?

7. What are your ideas for future sessions around assignment design and/or assessment?
Key Assignment Design Working Groups

Julie McDevitt, Coordinator of Measurement & Evaluation
Palo Alto College – January 2018
Agenda

Welcome and Introductions (10 min)

Session Details (20 min)
  Goals, Resources
  Context, Rationale
  Deliverables
  Rules of Engagement

Small Group Discussion Protocol (≈ 30 min each round, 2 hours)
Welcome and Introductions

- Faculty
- Staff
- Students
- Facilitator(s)
Goals

1. Improve overall quality of assignment.
2. Better align assignment to Institutional Learning Outcome(s).
Goals

Quality, Aligned Assignment → Quality, Fully Assessable Artifact → More Valid Results; More Accurate Measure of Student Proficiency
Resources

• PAC Academic Assessment web site:
  PAC Home Page
    > Faculty & Staff
      > Academic Assessment
        > Resources
Context
NILOA’s Initiative

• National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA)
• Tracking campus assessment work, NILOA noted rising interest in assignment design and use
• Invited faculty to apply to join assignment design groups
• These groups came together for a day of conversation and collaboration about their assignments
• 5-6 person facilitated “charrettes”
Context
NILOA’s Initiative

- www.assignmentlibrary.org
- 50-some assignments
- Revised and improved with feedback
- Contributed from a wide range of fields and institutional types
- Online, indexed, and searchable
- With a scholarly citation
- *Stimulated assignment work on campuses*
Rationale
Why Focus on Assignments?

1. Creating good assignments is challenging intellectual and creative work that should be visible, recognized, and rewarded.

2. Bring high-level learning outcomes to life.

3. Foster learning and document/assess it.

4. Send powerful signals to all stakeholders about what matters.

5. Lead to more valid assessment of learning outcomes.

6. Group work develops shared language among participants and cross-disciplinary awareness, understanding & alignment.

Other thoughts? Why did you “sign up?”
Rationale
What’s in it for You?

• A chance to refine an assignment
• Get ideas to take back to your classes
• Meet thoughtful colleagues
• Contribute to the work of others
• Develop a model key assignment for assessment
• Be part of a larger development:
  – NILOA’s Assignment Library Initiative
  – Assignment work on our campus, disciplinary associations, other state & national initiatives
Deliverables

1. Written reflection of group experience
2. Revise and submit assignment (end of Feb)
3. Complete Assignment Design Worksheet (end of Feb)
4. Implement revised assignment (spring 2018)
5. Meet to debrief (spring 2018)
Reflections

1. What was this process like for you? What ideas are you taking away?
2. What insights do you have about effective assignments?
3. What will you do next and what would help you do that?
4. How can others be brought into this work or benefit from it? What is most important to share?
5. How can we entice and excite faculty to think differently about assessment?
6. What are your perceptions / what did you gain from cross-disciplinary discussion?
# Assignment Design Worksheet: Communication

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Rules of Engagement

• We’re all in this together!
• Take turns
• Listen actively
• Focus on being helpful rather than critical
• Be respectful of each other & each other’s work
• Others?
Group Discussion Protocol

1. Participants review assignment – 5 minutes
2. Author introduces assignment – 5 minutes
3. Group discussion / Q&A—15-20 minutes
4. Written feedback—5 minutes
5. [Break—5 minutes]
Folder Contents

1. Small Group Discussion Protocol
2. Assignment Introduction
3. ILO Rubrics (all 6)
4. sample Assignment Design Worksheet

6. Assignments
7. Feedback Sheets
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