

### Overview:

In the previous academic year, AY 2015-2106, our department renamed COMM 130 by removing “introduction to” from it’s name. As of this academic year, the course appears in the catalog as “Visual Communication,” rather than “Introduction to Visual Communication.”

One reason this change was called for was that our department’s Assessment Committee had identified COMM 130 as the only place in our department’s curriculum where all majors, regardless of concentration, take the same course about *visual studies* (PLO #2). This was an important conclusion from curriculum mapping conducted in previous years, and it presents us with a dilemma for assessment. All Communication Arts majors in all concentrations are expected to develop higher competency in the *visual studies* learning objective than what is expected of students who have completed only COMM 130. At the same time, COMM 130 is the only course all our students take.

Given this dilemma, and given how early in our curriculum this 100-level course appears, the Assessment Committee determined that the *visual studies* learning objective was the most urgent to assess. We proceeded, under the advice of the Dr. Mark Nicholas, director of Institutional Assessment, by assessing Learning Outcomes in COMM 130.

We concluded that upon completing COMM 130, students are close to achieving mastery with respect to our *visual communication* learning objective (PLO2). This gives us confidence in this area of our curriculum. Going forward (in AY 2017-2018), we plan to confirm that students *achieve* mastery in the *visual studies* area by collecting data from our capstone Seminar in Communication Arts (COMM 450).

Communication Arts Assessment Committee, Key Accomplishments 2016-2017.

- Committee (formed in 2014-2015) met regularly throughout the year, and maintained a productive dialogue about assessment with other faculty in the department.
- Committee developed a provisional plan for department assessment activities through AY 2020-2021.
- Committee member Professor Robert Alter and Committee chairperson Niall Stephens conducted quantitative and qualitative assessment of *visual communication* Learning Objective (PLO2).

## 1. Degree Program & Learning Objectives

The Communication Arts Department grants one degree: **BA in Communication Arts**.

All students take a capstone course, Seminar in Communication Arts (COMM 450), which is designed to ensure that all students achieve our Program Learning Objectives (PLOs). These objectives are published on our department website:

<https://www.framingham.edu/academics/colleges/arts-and-humanities/communication-arts/program-information/mission>

Students can complete a Communication Arts degree via one of four different concentrations:

1. General Communication Studies (CMG)
2. Integrated Visual Media (IVM)
3. Organization and Corporate Communication (CMC)
4. Theater (CMH)

This year (AY 2016-2017), having identified COMM 130 as the only common requirement in Visual Communication for students in all four concentrations, we focused our assessment efforts on our *visual studies* learning objective (PLO2)

PLO2: Analyze visual images using discipline-specific terminologies.

The dilemma we faced was that students in different concentrations receive different levels of instruction in each of our five Program Learning Objectives (PLOs).

Ideally the work we did this year would allow us to answer the following question:

**Research Question 1:**

Do Learning Outcomes in COMM 130 (Visual Communication) demonstrate that all Communication Arts majors achieve proficiency in the area of *visual studies* (Program Learning Objective #2)?

In reality, given additional curriculum requirements for students in all four concentrations, our research question is best phrased as follows.

**Research Question 2:**

With the understanding that all students in all our concentrations will further develop visual skills/literacy through additional coursework *after* taking COMM 130, can we be confident that all students in our department gain a firm grounding in *visual studies* by taking COMM 130?

## 2: Evidence used to determine achievement of objectives.

Professors Robert Alter and Niall Stephens volunteered to conduct the assessment of slide show presentations and written papers. We reviewed 60 artifacts (30 essays and 30 slide shows), from 30 students in 4 classes (taught by professors Starobin, Dowling and Visiting Lecturer Ashley McDowell). All of these COMM 130 instructors assign the same end-of-semester project, requiring students to make a visual slide presentation *and* write a paper to accompany the presentation. There was agreement among department members that this assignment provided an excellent opportunity for assessing the accomplishment of *visual studies* Learning Outcomes.

The artifacts were collected from both fall '16 and spring '17 semesters. Once collected, artifacts were scrubbed of student names and other identifying data (a number of slide shows were submitted as PDF files, and could not be scrubbed of student names).

As in previous years, the artifacts were rated using a rubric based on the Program Learning Objectives.

### **PLO2 Visual Studies**

PLO2a Identify iconic concepts in history and design

PLO2b Categorize the semantics of color in visual images

PLO2c Evaluate the structures of visual texts

## Rubric For Assessment of artifacts from COMM 130 (AY 2016-2017)

	4	3	2	1	0
Quality of research concerning the visual image. [PLO2a and PLO2 b]	Clearly identifies all salient points in image's background.	Identifies all or most salient points in image's background	Identifies some of the salient points in image's background	Refers to some salient points in image's background.	Does not refer to any salient points in image's background
Ability to form an opinion on the visual image's significances and cultural impact.[PLO 2a]	Offers strong, well-justified, clear argument about image's cultural impact	Offers coherent argument about image's cultural impact.	Offers argument about image's cultural impact.	Offers incomplete argument about image's cultural impact.	Offers no argument about image's cultural impact.
Analysis of formal elements of visual image under discussion. [PLO 2c]	Provides cogent, complete analysis of image's form.	Provides clear analysis of image's form.	Provides some analysis of image's form.	Provides observations on image's form without analysis	Provides no observations on image's form.

This rubric was developed by the Assessment Committee in consultation with Professor Leslie Starobin and other instructors of COMM 130. We note that the rubric criteria produced as a result do not perfectly correspond to the Program Learning Objectives, above all because the assessment rubric places weight on the quality of students' research, whereas research skills are not explicitly contemplated in our *visual studies* Program Learning Objective. That said, we worked hard to keep the rubric criteria aligned with PLO2, and we understand the two sets of criteria to be well-aligned. The gap between the Program criteria and the Rubric criteria, such as it is, is not so much a matter of *alignment* as it is a question of *scope*: the criteria in the Rubric are broader than those in the Program Learning Objective.

### Norming (inter-coder reliability)

Robert Alter and Niall Stephens met twice to go over the rubric together and establish a measure of inter-coder reliability. Following the rubric, each of us gave three separate ratings for ten pairs of artifacts (ten slide shows and ten accompanying essays). Thus, each of us rated 1/3 of the artifacts independently from the other, giving us 30 separate ratings to compare. This comparison showed us agreeing exactly on 20 of thirty ratings, while the remaining nine times our scores diverged by only one point.

Observed agreement: 70%, with 100% of scores falling within one point of corresponding score by the other coder. See tabulation of rubric scores given by each coder below.

		STEPHENS					TOTAL
	Rubric Scores	0	1	2	3	4	
A	0	0					0
L	1		1				1
T	2		1	8	2		11
E	3			4	11		15
R	4				3	0	3
	TOTAL	0	2	12	16	0	30

After making this comparison, Professor Alter and I discussed each of the nine instances where we had not coincided, and agreed upon a final score. In practice, this meant mostly that I deferred to Professor Alter, though on a couple of occasions he deferred to me.

Having established a measure of confidence in the reliability of the rubric scores produced by each of us, and having agreed upon a final score for the scores on the artifacts in the “norming” set, Professor Alter and I divided up the remaining 40 artifacts, so that each of us evaluated 20 more artifacts each (ten essays and ten corresponding powerpoint slide shows).

### 3. Results and outcomes of program assessment AY 2016-2017

Results of the procedure described in the previous section are as follows

Rubric Score 1:

Quality of research concerning the visual image.

[PLO2a and PLO2 b]

Average Score: **2.7**

Rubric Score 2:

Ability to form an opinion on the visual image's significances and cultural impact.

[PLO 2a]

Average Score:

**2.36**

Rubric Score 3:

Analysis of formal elements of visual image under discussion.

[PLO 2c]

Average Score **2.56**

The distribution around these averages was not wide. Neither Professor Alter nor I assigned a score of 0 to any artifact. Similarly, only seven scores of 4 were assigned between the two of us.

### 4. Interpretation of assessment evidence

We interpret our results as follows.

- A score of 1 represents a learning outcome at the introductory level.
- A score of 2 represents a learning outcome at the level of reinforcing.
- A score of 3 or 4 represents a learning outcome at the level of mastery.

- A score of 4 represents an exceptional level of mastery, beyond the level we would expect *all* graduates of our program to achieve.

Given this interpretation, the outcome of our assessment exercise suggests that the answer to our Research Questions are as follows:

**RQ 1:** Do Learning Outcomes in COMM 130 (Visual Communication) demonstrate that all Communication Arts majors achieve proficiency in the area of *visual studies*.

**No, not quite.**

**RQ 2:** With the understanding that all students in all our concentrations will further develop visual skills/literacy through additional coursework *after* taking COMM 130, can we be confident that all students in our department gain a firm grounding in *visual studies* by taking COMM 130?

**Yes, highly confident.**

In other words, we conclude that upon completion of COMM 130, our students are approaching mastery in Program Learning Objective 2 (*visual studies*).

Results suggest that students' strongest area is in research skills. Students demonstrated an ability to work independently to become well-informed about a particular visual image, and to discuss its provenance, background, and history in a thorough and comprehensive fashion.

The scores also suggest that students are approaching a satisfactory level of achievement when it comes to analyzing the formal composition of a visual image..

The lowest average score corresponds to "the ability to form an opinion on the visual image's significances and cultural impact." The coders were not surprised

by this result. We both shared the impression, after going through these artifacts, that the most notable area of weakness in this student work was in their discussion of the cultural significance of iconic visual images – that is, drawing connections between appropriations or uses of the image under discussion, and wider cultural and historical trends. Student work frequently did not make robust connections between the images students presented and discussed and broader cultural and historical patterns.

## 5. Changes made as a result of assessment

Apart from making a minor correction to the wording of PLO2 as posted on our department's website, no formal or institutional changes have yet been made as a result of Assessment Activities in AY 2016-2017. Nevertheless, two specific undertakings have followed from this year's findings.

First, the assessment committee has raised the concern identified in the previous section with instructors of COMM 130: the impression of Professor Alter and myself that more could be done to encourage students to be aware of the role of visual artifacts in a broader pattern of culture. Not all COMM 130 instructors share our concern. However, all in the department agree that after making more progress in any of our four concentrations, students should demonstrate a stronger cultural-historical awareness than that demonstrated this year by the mostly Freshmen and Sophomores who take COMM 130.

This brings us to the second undertaking within our department in response to this year's findings: further assessment. The assessment of learning outcomes carried out this year has established that, by taking COMM 130 (Visual Communication), all Communication Arts students achieve a baseline of competency somewhat short of mastery in our *visual studies* Learning Objective. At the same time, our concentration programs, especially Integrated Visual Media (CMI) and "general" Communication Studies (CMG) – but also Theater and Organizational and Corporate Communication – are designed to deepen students' competencies in this area considerably beyond the COMM 130 baseline introduction.

The assessment of learning outcomes in COMM 130 demonstrates that our program provides all Communication Arts students with a firm grounding for visual literacy, yet **our curriculum is intended and designed to give all students additional instruction** to develop further *visual studies* competencies. Data gathered during this round of assessment (AY 2016-2017) suggest that

students are close to achieving mastery in *visual studies* after taking the core requirement COMM 130. We emphasize that while the data does not definitively demonstrate that upon graduation, all students have achieved mastery of this Program Learning Objective (PLO2), it gives us reason to be confident that this is the case.

Our confidence is based upon the following curriculum requirements.

#### CMG (“general” Communication Arts)

- “Choose two” courses in the area of *visual studies* and
- “Choose two” courses in the area of visual production

#### CMC (Organizational and Corporate Communication)

- Design for Integrated Media (COMM 200) and
- Advertising Techniques (COMM 270)

#### CMI (“Integrated Visual Media)

Developing *visual studies* competencies is the focus of this concentration.

Concentration requirements that clearly further this goal include, but are not limited to:

- Design for Integrated Media (COMM 200)
- Basic and Intermediate Photography (COMM 208 and COMM 315)
- Interactive Design (COMM 225)
- Three additional courses in what might be called “media design and creation.”

#### CMH (Theater)

- Theatre production (COMM 264)
- “Choose one” course in costume and/or costume design

We note that these are minimum requirements in the area of graphic design and visual arts, broadly understood. Many, if not most, students in Theater (CMH) and Organization and Corporate (CMC) concentrations will take more than these minimum requirements. We also note that theater and performance, while not included in the above list, are nevertheless a form of visual communication. We expect that *visual studies* learning objectives are further developed for theater concentrators through courses in acting and performance.

In sum, the data collected during this round reinforce our confidence that our programs achieve Program Learning Objective #2 (*visual studies*). However, given that the outcomes observed in COMM 130 fall somewhat short of the level of mastery we expect students to achieve, we need additional data from students who have progressed further through our four concentrations to confirm definitively that PLO2 (*visual studies*) is being met.

The five-year plan we have had in place since last year stipulates that 2017-2018 is the year to assess our capstone course, Seminar in Communication Arts (COMM 450). We are currently deliberating about whether or not we will use this as an opportunity to collect further data on *visual studies* learning outcomes in AY 2017-2018. If we are to do this, we will have to come up with innovative ways to collect the data. Students in COMM 450 are generally not given an assignment that lends itself to assessing *visual studies* competencies in the way our department has conducted assessment in the past. Students do not, as a matter of course, all produce critical or creative work that can be used to assess their level of accomplishment in terms of our department's PLO2.

The Assessment Committee is currently discussing what learning outcomes to assess as we look at COMM 450. The question of whether or not to attempt to assess learning outcomes in *visual studies* for a second time in two years remains on the table. Depending on the considerations and priorities that emerge as we consider COMM 450, we may have an opportunity to demonstrate

definitively what this year's data collection allows us to claim with a fairly high degree of confidence: our curriculum successfully meets Program Learning Objective 2 (*visual studies*). Given ongoing contract negotiations and, pending their resolution, a work to rule policy by the faculty union, our conversations have not been as intensive or formalized as they would otherwise be. However, appreciation of the value of the assessment process is growing among faculty in our department, and the Assessment Committee looks forward to carrying our work forward in AY 2017-2018.

## 6. Conclusion:

There are four core courses for all Communication Arts majors, regardless of their concentration:

1. Introduction to Speech Communication (COMM 115)
2. Introduction to Visual Communication (COMM 130)
3. Media/Society/Self (COMM 250)
4. Seminar in Communication Arts (COMM 450)

This year we gathered data on Learning Outcomes in the second of these four required courses (COMM 130). The data give us confidence that our visual communication curriculum is sound – that our students achieve the Program Learning Objective in the area of *visual studies* (PLO2). The data tell us that students completing COMM 130 are approaching the level of mastery we expect from our majors. However, they reflect learning outcomes for students who are at an early stage in our curriculum. We are confident that students achieve full mastery as they progress through the divergent curricula of each of our four concentrations. Further data collection is needed to confirm this expectation, but we do not consider such data collection to be urgent. Depending upon what priorities emerge as we plan assessment activities for AY 2017-2018, we may be able to develop a rationale and methodology through which to collect data on *visual studies* learning outcomes from students in our capstone course, COMM 450.

We hope contract negotiations, and the work-to-rule policy will end soon, so that we can engage in more formal and intensive consultation with one another, and with the Director of Institutional Assessment, as we work on these questions.

Going forward, our department assessment plan represents our best understanding at moment of the areas of our questions about the effectiveness of our curriculum. Our assessment plan is provisional, which is to say less and less definite the further we look into the future. Our plan to collect data from the

capstone course (COMM 450) next year is not as likely to change as is our plan to assess the “general” concentration (UCMG) in AY 2020-2021.

As we continue to work on the plan outlined below, we will identify the appropriate Learning Objectives and Learning Outcomes to be targeted each year. The plan reflects the areas of the curriculum that we believe are most in need of scrutiny. Importantly, it envisions looking at specific concentrations, as well as at a learning objective (PLO5, *visual production*) which corresponds more directly to some concentrations than to others. In any case, having assessed outcomes for one of five learning objectives this year, our goal is to have assessed outcomes on all five learning objectives by AY 2020-2021.

#### Assessment Plan

2017-2018: Assess learning outcomes in Capstone Course (COMM 450)

2018-2019: Assess visual production (PLO5)

2019-2020: Assess Theater concentration

2020-2021: Assess UCMG

We make two final points. The first is to repeat that this year’s assessment, while revealing a need for further data collection, gives us confidence in the strength of our curriculum, at least with respect to the *visual studies* Program Learning Objective.

The second point is that the challenge raised by this process, (assessing the same Learning Outcomes across four distinct concentrations with different curricular requirements), and by the multi-year Assessment Plan above, underlines a difficulty for assessment in the Communication Arts department that we have long been aware of: our department’s “hybrid” nature. The curriculum of our department includes elements from social science, humanities, artistic creation, and performance. Our students are not trained in a single discipline,

but in a variety of disciplines. We believe this breadth is a strength of our program. When it comes to assessment, however, it poses some difficulties.

Most notably, it is reasonable to expect that students earning the same degree with different concentrations achieve different learning objectives to different levels. How can we assess all students on the same level? How much divergence in skill levels should we expect and/or accept between different concentrators? For example, with respect to this year's data collection and research questions, we should expect that concentrators in Integrated Visual Media (CMI) will tend to achieve greater levels of proficiency in PLO 2 and PLO 5 than other students. How can we reconcile such expectations with the goal of a single, unified program assessment plan?

Such are the questions we face in assessing the Communication Arts program. Working to answer them on both theoretical and practical, pedagogical levels will undoubtedly improve our curriculum. The Assessment Committee looks forward to the work ahead.