

Assessment of Student Learning Plan (ASLP): Psychology

2018-19 Academic Year

University of Southern Maine

A. College, Department, Date

College: Science, Technology, and Health
 Department: Psychology
 Date: May 31, 2019

B. Contact Person for the Assessment Plan

Name and Title: Liz Vella, Professor

C. Degree Program

Name of Degree Program: Psychology

D. Assessment of Student Learning: Program Assessment

Step 1: Identify the Student Learning Outcomes (SLO's)

- a. Do you have your student learning outcomes published on your department's website? Not Yet.
 If yes, please indicate the url: _____
- i. If no, please list 3-5 of the most important student learning outcomes for your program. **What will students know by the end of your program?**

For this ASLP, I am opting to assess learning outcomes specific to my PSY 206 Experimental Methodology Lab. Here are the stated learning outcomes from my lab syllabus:

Following successful lab completion, students will be able to:

- Describe relationships between theory, hypothesis, and evidence
- Design, conduct, and interpret basic psychological research
- Locate, evaluate, and use scientific literature when exploring psychological phenomena
- Demonstrate effective writing for different purposes
- Prepare an oral presentation, including effective use of visual supplements
- Prepare a research paper based upon gathering and integrating data about a well-defined topic and drawing grounded conclusions

- b. Do you have a **matrix or curriculum map** showing when your student learning outcomes are assessed and in which courses? No

Step 2: Assessment Methods Selected and Implemented

- c. Identify which direct measures (other than course grades), that were used to determine whether students achieved the stated learning outcomes for the degree.

There are three APA style empirical reports that students must author every semester, based upon different modalities of research design (e.g., correlation, naturalistic observation, and experiment). On the day that each report is due, I have students complete an anonymous open-ended questionnaire reflecting upon their experience working on the reports. The purpose of doing the assessment was to give students the opportunity to anonymously ‘vent’, since the reports are challenging, but I was also interested in learning about their perceptual experience writing the paper. On the day that the first paper is due (correlational study on personality and environmentalism), I have students answer the following open-ended questions:

1. Describe your experience writing this paper.
2. What was your most difficult challenge?
3. If you were to design this study yourself or were to do it over again, what, if anything would you have done differently? Also, feel free to describe any perceived limitations to our study.
4. Do you believe our results generalize to the real world? How so? If not, why?
5. Please provide me with any additional comments you’d like to add and/or let me know if there is some other topic you would prefer to be studying in the lab.

Students complete the same questionnaire upon completing their second and third papers of the semester, with the only key difference concerning the first question. Instead of asking them to describe their experience, I instead ask that they compare their experience writing the second paper to the first or the third paper to the first two, depending upon the assignment.

Procedures and Results

Data was collected anonymously via Survey Monkey from Spring 2012 to Spring 2019. Each time that I taught PSY 206 during this interval, students were requested to complete the open-ended anonymized survey on the day that each paper was due. I taught PSY 206 across 11 semesters during this window of 7 years, including 6 spring semesters and 5 fall semesters. Each semester, the first paper is always the personality predictors of environmentalism study. The reason for starting each semester with this paper is clear: the investigation is purely cross-sectional/correlational and a direct replication of a previous study. As such, this study is the most simplistic of the three performed during the semester. That said, I do understand that many students find the variables investigated for this first paper to be the most abstract of the semester. So, there is a counterbalance between the simplicity of the design alongside the challenge of the relatedness of the content under investigation. For spring semesters, students complete the environmentalism paper first, followed by an experiment on the effects of music on mood, and concluding with a naturalistic observation of gender differences in traffic compliance. For fall semesters, students complete the traffic compliance study second and the music study last. The reason for the different ordering of assignments between spring and fall semesters pertains to the weather in relationship to data collection of the naturalist observation on traffic compliance. Students gather their naturalistic observation data in April for spring (last study) semesters and October for fall (second study) semesters (February and November data collection outdoors are

not a good option, since it is too cold to expect students to stand outside for an hour to gather data under those conditions).

For the purpose of this assessment, I have adopted a grounded theory approach (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1995) to categorize thematic content from the qualitative responses of my surveys as they pertain to questions one (describe your process) and two (what was your most difficult challenge?) in relation to the environmentalism paper and the traffic compliance paper. For the environmentalism survey, I received 219 survey responses, whereas 207 survey responses were submitted for the traffic compliance paper. Given the large volume of data collected, I employed systematic random sampling to amass roughly 10% of the data for analyses. For the environmentalism survey, every 11th comment was selected for items 1 and 2, whereas for the traffic compliance survey, every 10th comment was selected for these two items. This process yielded a sample of 20 responses to be coded for thematic content across the four items (items 1 and 2 for the two papers). Below please find descriptive statistics in the form of thematic content frequencies and percentages for each item across the two surveys, alongside interpretation.

Item 1: Describe your process writing this paper. Four themes emerged from the data set in terms of thematic content pertaining to process: time management issues, statistics challenge, writing challenge, and good experience. Here are examples to illustrate each coded category from the environmentalism survey data set:

Time Management Issues: *“I did not complete this paper on time, mainly due to personal issues and factors outside of the class.”*

Statistics Challenge: *“This was definitely a challenge for me. When it comes to interpreting statistics and applying real world meaning it takes me a bit longer to process and make sense of it. I often second guess myself which makes things more difficult, thus having confidence in the meaning of the paper is even harder. I think this was a good topic to start out with given the simplicity but I feel like incorporating more real world application would have been interesting as it seemed like it wasn't going to change anything in my perspective of what I do in my daily living.”*

Writing Challenge: *“Writing this paper was very difficult for me at first. This was my first time using APA format (VERY different from MLA), and this, combined with this being my first time writing a paper as formal as this, made this paper challenging.”*

Good Experience: *“I really liked writing this paper because empirical reports are what I like to do. I am not a creative writer, so this type of writing is what works for me. Every element was clear cut and easy to write, especially with your helpful documents you gave us.”*

Here are the frequencies and percentages of the four categories for the environmentalism paper:

	Frequency	Percentage
Time Management Issues	3	14%
Statistics Challenge	3	14%
Writing Challenge	7	34%
Good Experience	8	38%

Total 21 100%

Note. There are 21 comments coded because one comment was coded under two themes (stats and writing challenge).

Based upon these preliminary data, it is gratifying to note that the highest percentage of coded themes falls under a good experience, suggesting that the final learning outcome of the lab pertaining to empirical research paper preparation is being satisfied early in the semester.

For the traffic compliance survey students were again asked to describe their process writing the paper, reflecting upon whether it went more smoothly this time. For this data set, two themes emerged: statistics challenge and good experience.

Statistics Challenge: *“I think things were a lot less challenging in terms of what was expected of me. I still had major trouble when it came to writing out the results section, but that's probably because we used chi-square for the first time.”*

Good Experience: *“This paper was relatively easy compared to the first two papers. The data was very comprehensible.”*

Here are the frequencies and percentages for the two categories for the traffic compliance paper:

	Frequency	Percentage
Statistics Challenge	1	5%
Good Experience	19	95%
Total	20	100%

When comparing the two surveys, it is evident that the frequency of good experiences more than doubled to constitute nearly all the comments for describing their process relative to the first paper, whereas statistical challenges went down and challenges pertaining to time management and writing the paper itself disappeared in reference to the process writing the paper itself. Next, we'll need to examine data pertaining to item 2 of difficult challenge.

Item 2: What was your most difficult challenge writing this paper? For the environmental survey, five themes emerged to represent the most difficult challenge writing the first paper: Time Management Issues, Intro/Discussion Section Issues, Compare/Contrast Writing, Statistics Challenge, and Structure/Formatting. Here are examples to illustrate each coded category from item 2 of the environmental survey data set:

Time Management Issues: *“Life. But with the paper, I have never done a paper anywhere close to this type or scope before, and as such had many problems with the most basic parts of getting started. Unlike most other papers I have written which are much more free form, with this one I could not just start writing and edit everything at the end.”*

Intro/Discussion Issues: *“The introduction especially the hypothesizes. Also the limitation of the discussion section.”*

Compare/Contrast Writing: *“My most difficult challenge was the cross analysis of findings with other scholarly works, as well as properly phrasing some sentences.”*

Statistics Challenge: *“For me, the most difficult thing was just understanding the data. Even though once you “unpack” the information it’s a little easier to understand, it’s still a complicated topic. And because it’s a complicated topic (one that I’m not personally interested in), I found it difficult to write a lot about it and say everything that needed to be said.”*

Structure/Formatting Issues: *“Trying to make sure everything was under the right section and that it didn’t make its way to other parts of the paper.”*

Here are the frequencies and percentages pertaining to the five identified thematic content areas from item 2 on the environmental survey:

	Frequencies	Percentages
Time Management Issues	5	19%
Intro/Discussion Issues	5	19%
Compare/Contrast Writing	7	28%
Statistics Challenge	4	15%
Structure Formatting Issues	5	19%
Total	26	100%

Note. There are 26 coded commentaries because some responses met criteria for more than one content area.

Based upon this first paper of the semester, it is evident that the most frequently cited challenge stems from compare-contrast writing, a key element to scientific writing and cogent to two learning outcomes for the lab: 1) locate, evaluate, and use scientific literature when exploring psychological phenomena; and 2) prepare a research paper based upon gathering and integrating data about a well-defined topic and drawing grounded conclusions. The other coded challenges observed in reference to item 2 for this assignment occurred in relatively equal frequency. These challenges do indeed relate to learning outcomes, perhaps with the exception of time management issues. That said, conducting scientific studies requires lots of organization and preparation, so it is not surprising to see students citing this issue as problematic, at least at first. Problems relating to the intro and discussion section relates to all learning outcomes for the lab except the oral presentation component. Writing these sections requires proposing hypotheses and interpreting evidence based upon those predictions, in addition to evaluating scientific literature, demonstrating writing for different purposes (stating a purpose for the study in the intro and comparing our results to other published work for the discussion), and the final learning outcome of research paper preparation. The statistics challenge relates to the second learning outcome of research interpretation, and the structural formatting issues relates to the last learning outcome of research paper preparation.

Finally, let us review the data pertaining to item 2 of the traffic compliance survey for the biggest challenge, whereby five thematic content areas likewise emerged: statistics challenge, intro/discussion issues, time management issues, writing challenge, and compare/contrast writing. Here are examples to illustrate each content area:

Statistics Challenge: *“Definitely writing out the results section.”*

Intro/Discussion Issues: *“I still find the introduction to be difficult as I have a hard time laying out what I need to write. The discussion is a little difficult as well.”*

Time Management Issues: *“Similar to the last empirical report, timing was my most difficult issue.”*

Writing Challenge: *“The most difficult challenge was trying not to repeat myself too much throughout the paper.”*

Compare/Contrast Writing: *“It is hard to pick a part of this paper that is especially hard...I found it to be relatively easy. Sometimes understanding and relating the articles to our study was a bit challenging. Overall this was not bad.”*

Here are the frequencies and percentages pertaining to the five identified challenging areas of the traffic compliance paper:

	Frequencies	Percentages
Statistics Challenge	5	24%
Intro/Discussion Issues	10	47%
Time Management Issues	1	5%
Writing Challenges	2	10%
Compare/Contrast Writing	3	14%
Total	21	100%

Note. There are 21 coded responses, since one comment was coded as both statistics and intro/discussion issues.

Evaluating thematic content between the two assignments for most difficult challenge, three findings are evident: 1) elimination of structure/formatting issues, coupled with significant reductions in time management and compare/contrast writing issues; 2) similar frequencies of statistics challenge; and 3) significant increases in intro/discussion issues. From these data it is arguable that students are becoming more proficient in managing their time for working on these assignments, that they have developed skill in APA structured empirical report writing, and that they are likewise becoming more skillful at compare-contrast discourse. However, it would seem that students are relatively stable in their struggles with statistics and that the reductions in time management, structural formatting, and compare-contrast discourse problems is being counterbalanced by an increase in issues pertaining to writing the intro and discussion section. That said, it is worthy of note that students are coded as having intro/discussion issues if mentioning one or both as problematic. Further, some of the comments are relatively benign. For example, *“The most difficult thing for me was the intro. I just find it hard to get started sometimes then once I have an idea down it's way easier to continue.”*

Step 3: Using the Assessment results to Improve Student Learning

- a. Briefly describe your unit's process of reviewing the program assessment results (i.e. annual process by faculty committee, etc).

This has to be a brief response, since no structure exists within the psychology dept to assess our curriculum. We, at present, have no process. I do plan to start one this next academic year, but the process itself will need to evolve and take time. As you may know, the psychology dept climate to assessment has historically been hostile, to say the least. Three full time faculty retired in Fall 2017, just a few months after I took the chair of the dept. I've been the assessment program for the dept for how many years? I've lost track. There have been a number of positive new changes to the faculty. We plan to forge a pro-assessment culture. That said, I will explicitly acknowledge frustration. It is currently 7pm on Saturday, June 1, 2019. So, I'm typing this report late on a weekend. Why? **Because I don't have any other time to do this work.** It's summer and I'm still working 7 days a week and you're asking me about how my dept is doing things that we are not incentivized to do, in any conceivable way, shape, or form. I'm talented in assessment and can think of a variety of high quality ways to assess our curriculum. However, no one at USM is giving me time or money to do this work. Nowhere on our faculty review materials is their mention of academic assessment. We have a no structure 'make it work' model at USM re assessment. If this institution wants high quality assessment work to transpire, I highly recommend that they develop a clearly defined system that will support the work, thereby creating a functional and sustainable model that would sidestep frustrated and exhausted commentary on the matter.

- b. What specific changes have been or will be made to improve student learning, as a result of using the program assessment results?

Despite my exhausted frustration, I found this process illuminating and believe that this qualitative data set could be mined more for reflective self assessment and metacognitive awareness of self as a learner, which are learning outcomes articulated elsewhere in our departmental self study. In terms of the result from this ASLP, I believe that there is evidence to support three of the stated learning outcomes for the lab:

- Locate, evaluate, and use scientific literature when exploring psychological phenomena
- Demonstrate effective writing for different purposes
- Prepare a research paper based upon gathering and integrating data about a well-defined topic and drawing grounded conclusions.

Reductions in compare-contrast discourse as a biggest challenge suggest that students are improving in their ability to evaluate and use scientific literature when exploring psychological phenomena, whereas reductions in structure/formatting issues supports improvements in preparing a research paper and demonstrating effective writing for different purposes. That said, students still seem to struggle with statistics (am not surprised by this observation) and endorsed a high frequency of problems with writing introduction and discussion sections. These issues relate to two other learning outcomes in the lab:

- Describe the relationship between theory, hypotheses, and evidence
- Design, conduct, and interpret basic psychological research

The intro section requires a statement of purpose with hypotheses, whereas the discussion section must relate the evidence back to the hypotheses. The results section is where we conduct and interpret analyses. Collectively, these learning outcomes may be the more lofty ones for students to achieve. However, does specifying them as a biggest challenge really constitute failure to

attain those learning outcomes? Perhaps it is more promising that these issues all but disappeared from their open-ended descriptions pertaining to their process writing the paper. It is gratifying to me that virtually all randomly selected process items for the traffic compliance paper were positive experiences.

Moreover, midstream during this time period of data collection, I have implemented interventions that should theoretically enhance statistical proficiency and ability to engage with the intro/discussion sections:

1. I have a learning commons tutor for PSY 206 to help the students in the working on these different report sections
2. I have implemented 10 discussion days of empirical reports in the PSY 205 lecture section, for which all PSY 206 lab students are co-enrolled.

These changes were first implemented a few semesters ago and ought to be improving some of these performance issues. Further, the psychology dept has only just recently made the statistical pre-requisite for PSY 206 more rigorous by no longer permitting MAT 120 as an alternative to our stats in psych course (PSY 201). It has recently come to my attn. that MAT 120 only spends one week, at best, on hypothesis testing, which is a disservice to our psychology students. In removing the MAT 120 prerequisite option, I hope to make the stats preparation for PSY 206 more homogenous.

c. Date of most recent program review/self-study?

We completed our most recent self-study in summer 2015 and had our external reviewers evaluate the program in Fall 2015. These materials can be made available to your office upon request.

E.Course Assessment Activities: Is your program able to report any assessment-related activities at the Course-Level... (i.e. created grading rubrics to use in required courses, examined student progress in entry-level courses, developed a new course, etc)? Please briefly explain any assessment projects.

Not at present, but we do have plans for the future:

Kristen Gleason (new prof in Community and Cultural Psychology) is adopting the learning assistant model for her PSY 100 course. As such, Krissy must assess the efficacy of the model and is in the process of embedding assessments into the course itself.

Rikki Miller and I have been discussing ways for her to assess learning outcomes in some of her 300 level courses.

Finally, Michael Stevenson has agreed for us to discuss the possibility of assessing learning outcomes specific to his courses.

To this end, assessment is an agenda item on the first faculty meeting of Fall 2019, at which time we will plan a clear structure of assessments to be reported upon in the 2019-2020 ASLP.

F. Community Engagement Activities in your departmental curriculum:

a. Does your department have a student learning outcome that is related to any community engagement activities? Not yet...but we will. We just hired a community and cultural psychologist who will begin her first semester teaching for the psych program this fall. Working with Dr. Gleason will provide us with multiple opportunities to augment this aspect of our curriculum. Furthermore, Rikki Miller's PSY 350 and PSY 371 courses now meet the new gen ed requirement on engaged learning and we may be moving forward with methods to assess these associated learning outcomes.

b. Please indicate if any of the community engagement activities listed below are included in your program's curriculum, by noting which activities are required or optional for students in your major.

<u>Community Engagement Activity</u>	<u>Required/Optional</u>
Student Research (related to a community-based problem)	Optional
Student-Faculty Community Research Project	Optional
Internship, or a Field Experience	Optional
Independent Study (community-related project)	Optional
Capstone Course (community-related project)	Optional
Service-Learning (course-based)	Required
Study Abroad, or an International Program	Optional
Interdisciplinary Collaborative Project (community related)	None
Student Leadership Activities (related to a team project)	None
Students/Faculty Community Leadership (advisory boards, committees, conference presentations)	Optional
Other Activities (not mentioned above):	

c. Please list any courses (i.e. EDU 400) that have a community engagement activity in your program.

Entry-level courses: N/A

Mid-level courses: N/A

Upper-level courses: PSY 350, PSY 375, PSY 400*, PSY 401*, PSY 410

*Note: Depending upon the faculty advisor, PSY 400/401 may or may not have a civic engagement component. PSY 410 is internship and always includes civic engagement.