Connecting Research to Our Practice

Making Program Assessment Doable, Sustainable, and Rewarding
By Jessica Miller and Martina Lindseth

2014, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire’s Department of Languages answered a university-wide call to establish Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) for programs. Based on relevant literature, as well as on our own experience and expertise, we developed an assessment template with a straightforward and robust yet flexible protocol that educators can easily apply and adjust to different learning outcomes, teaching styles, and course contents.

ACTFL tools, including ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements, and ACTFL Performance Descriptors, helped us determine our own language goals (see figure 1). Once these goals had been established, however, instructors were left to develop their own ways to determine if outcomes were or were not met in their individual courses. As a result, the assessment process lacked intentionality, uniformity, and consistency.

Our department personnel recently engaged in a regularly-scheduled self-study process involving feedback from an external reviewer. While the reviewer was impressed with the articulation of our six cross-language outcomes, she expressed concern about the fragmented nature of the assessment process. She suggested that we develop a more unified approach.

This suggestion resonated with us as being the next logical step. We had articulated outcomes, and we now needed to find a systematic and meaningful way to measure them. This also coincided with the university administration placing greater emphasis on academic assessment. It was time for action.

Pros and Cons

A review of relevant literature reveals both the challenges and benefits of tackling language program assessment. On the one hand, measuring student learning outcomes is often perceived as “an under-resourced activity” that “adds a considerable burden to the workloads of instructors” (Davis, 2016). On the other hand, measuring learning outcomes “motivates faculty” (Gotz, 2014, p. 17) and “instills a sense of ownership” (Gotz, 2014, p. 17) in the program.

Engage in interpersonal communication on a variety of topics of a personal, public, and professional nature.

1. Interpret written and spoken language and visual images on a variety of topics of a personal, public, and professional nature.

2. Present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics of a personal, public, and professional nature.

3. Demonstrate an awareness and knowledge of practices, products, and perspectives related to the target culture(s) in spoken, written, and visual forms.

4. Connect and integrate their language study with other disciplines and communities for academic and social purposes.

5. Evaluate and address issues in local and global contexts through critical and creative thinking skills.

By the end of the program, our graduates will be able to:

1. Engage in interpersonal communication on a variety of topics of a personal, public, and professional nature.

2. Engage in interpersonal communication on a variety of topics of a personal, public, and professional nature.

3. Engage in interpersonal communication on a variety of topics of a personal, public, and professional nature.

4. Engage in interpersonal communication on a variety of topics of a personal, public, and professional nature.

5. Engage in interpersonal communication on a variety of topics of a personal, public, and professional nature.

6. Engage in interpersonal communication on a variety of topics of a personal, public, and professional nature.

Figure 1: Program outcomes for Languages majors at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.

The Language Educator, a publication for The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, provides educators of all languages at all levels with a single, comprehensive source of news and information. It has been recognized as the most knowledgeable resource focusing on the profession. “Taking Ownership: Making Program Assessment Doable, Sustainable, and Rewarding” describes an assessment protocol that Miller and Lindseth developed to measure student learning outcomes at the end of their language programs. The protocol follows a straightforward yet flexible template that educators can easily apply and adjust to different outcomes, teaching styles and course contents.