

Oral Communication (O) General Education Assessment

The following report summarizes our findings based on course portfolios submitted as part of the assessment of the General Education Oral Communication (O) requirement.

Student Learning Outcomes

Students in O courses will demonstrate:

1. Proficiency in oral presentations.
2. The ability to improve oral presentations in response to critiques.
3. Skill in listening to and critiquing oral presentations.

Description of Oral Communications (O) Requirement

O courses require that each student give at least two oral presentations.

At least 15% of the course grade must be based on oral presentations, including critiques of such presentations and other listening skills.

The course must provide ample opportunity for students to critique presentations, based on criteria such as: rapport with audience; voice, projection, and audibility; clarity of purpose; originality of ideas; organization; persuasiveness of evidence; and ability to respond to questions.

Provide as much opportunity as possible for students to improve their oral presentations in response to feedback.

Should emphasize listening as well as speaking skills.

Assessment Procedure

Binghamton University utilizes a system of assessment through the University Undergraduate Curriculum Committee for each general education content area. Instructors are randomly selected and asked to submit course portfolios containing syllabi, instructor statements about the degree to which students met student learning outcomes, and an estimate of the percentage of student who exceeded, met/fulfilled, approached and did not meet the expectations as stated in the learning outcomes. Every three years, the UUCC members review the courses portfolios.

Findings

This assessment is based on portfolios from 18 courses, ranging from 100- level to 400- level courses, and across a broad range of departments as well as schools with Binghamton University. Courses were taught between 2011 and 2015.

Of the 18 courses reviewed, almost all met the basic requirements. Only one course failed to include learning objectives in the course syllabus and one course did not include a peer review process. Further, for the vast majority of the courses, oral presentations played an important role in the course, rather than simply being an add-on. The style of presentations within most classes was quite varied, with many courses including an individual and a group presentation, a short and a long presentation. This provided the opportunity for students to prepare and present in a variety of ways.

Based on the data provided, approximately 81 percent of the students taking an O course between met or exceeded the learning outcomes. However, it is important to note that these data were quite variable, and difficult to interpret in many cases (e.g., several instructors indicated that 100% of the students “met the expectations,” with none exceeding, approaching, or failing). In contrast, instructors’ self-assessments provided more useful information, and were, in general, quite positive. Instructors commented both on students’ weaknesses and strengths with regard to their proficiency in oral presentations. Weaknesses that were mentioned were the misuse of Power Point slides, speaking too quickly or too softly, and a lack of creativity in the presentations. On balance, almost all instructors were enthusiastic about improvements through the semester. It appears that the majority of students improved substantially in their oral communication skills. This can likely be attributed to both practice and extensive feedback. Most courses used a system of thorough, individualized and repeated feedback.

Some examples of instructors’ comments about improvement:

The efforts of the students was wonderful, more than 90% of my class improved their argumentative, oral, and writing skills over the course of the semester. The class demonstrated their abilities to think critically, offer each other feedback, and they were receptive to my feedback as the instructor

By the end of this course, students’ presentations were creative, interactive, informative, and interesting.

A stellar example of this improvement is the student who received the lower grade on the first presentation, and then received the highest grade on the next presentation.

Summary

Overall, the learning objectives of the O General Education requirement are being met. Students are gaining practice in giving oral presentations, are improving their presentations as a result of the feedback that is given, and are gaining skills in listening and critiquing others' presentations.

Recommendations

1. Faculty offering courses that meet General Education requirements should be reminded each semester to include the learning outcomes in their syllabi.
2. Faculty offering courses fulfilling the O General Education requirement should be reminded of the guidelines for the Oral Communication requirement, specifically that (a) the grade must be based at least 15% of the course grade on oral presentations, and that (b) students must be involved in critiquing spoken presentations.
3. The learning outcomes for the O requirement should be integrated with the critical course content, so that the speaking and listening skills are central to learning the content, and the presentations provide an additional way for students to engage with the material. Although this was the case for the majority of the courses, there were a few examples where the presentations seemed less central to the course material.
4. Instructors should be reminded that the emphasis of the O requirement includes skills in listening and critiquing as well as in speaking.