

## January 2017 Report on Assessment

Readers: Bhikshuni Jin Jr, Sarah Babcock, Lauren Bausch, Stephen Wilcox, Franklyn Wu

### Introduction

**Description of Process:** In the fall of 2016, the Program Review Committee met to determine how to sample student work and carry out assessment. Previous assessment work at DRBU was undertaken by the entire teaching Faculty. As a group, Faculty members either read all papers of all students or all papers of some students. For this iteration, the Program Review Committee decided to revise the assessment process to use time more efficiently and to proceed more systematically for the purpose of program review.

The committee selected a sampling of student work from the two graduated MA cohorts (classes of 2015 and 2016). Three students were chosen from each cohort. For each student, three pieces of writing were chosen from both their first and their final (fourth) semesters. This way, progress could be tracked from the time students entered the program to their completion of it.

Rather than having the entire teaching Faculty assess student work, a small group of five readers was tasked with scoring student papers. Three readers were Faculty members. Two of the readers were guest reviewers not on the faculty who were chosen in order to get some outside perspective on the assessment process. One of the guest reviewers has a PhD in Music Composition from University of Pennsylvania and extensive teaching experience; the other guest reviewer is currently finishing her dissertation as the final requirement for a PhD in Chinese from UC Santa Barbara and also has teaching experience. The work of each student was read by two readers and scored using the existing rubrics for each of the four PLOs.

The group of readers then met on January 9, 2017, to discuss scoring results and note any patterns, strengths, and/or concerns revealed by the assessment, as well as propose action items, described later in this report. The teaching Faculty will meet as a whole to go over the results with the Program Review Committee members, prioritize concerns, and adopt action items.

**How this fits into program review:** The program review process at DRBU includes a review against the criterion of effectiveness of instruction. Assessment is the most important process that DRBU has for analyzing student learning. Other methods are indirect, such as graduation rates and employer surveys on graduates.

**Student work sample description:** The Program Review Committee selected three papers from the students' first and fourth semesters, including a spiritual exercise reflection paper wherever possible. Spiritual exercises are integrated into DRBU's curriculum and the students' reflections provide evidence for PLO 2. All papers were anonymized before being distributed to

the readers. In total there were four packets containing the work of three students, or portfolios, for a total of 18 papers. Each portfolio was read twice.

These are the papers sampled for this round of assessment:

MA 2015

Semester 1

- Comparative Hermeneutics 1
- Platform Sutra
- Sanskrit 1

Semester 4

- Buddhist Hermeneutics 3
- Lotus Sutra
- Spiritual Exercise Reflection

MA 2016

Semester 1

- Comparative Hermeneutics 1
- Platform Sutra
- Spiritual Exercise Reflection

Semester 4

- Buddhist Hermeneutics 3
- Lotus Sutra
- Spiritual Exercise Reflection

### **Data Findings**

Based on the scores of the sample papers, overall, students have grown in almost all of the program learning outcomes except for PLO 1 where their starting point was not captured in this assessment (Figure 1). The growths ranged from 31% to 36% and the average scores all reached or were very close to the program's expected level (3). Similar trends can be observed in Figure 2 and Figure 3 where the scores of the two cohorts are displayed separately. The measurement issue of PLO1 will be addressed in the Instrumental Issues section.

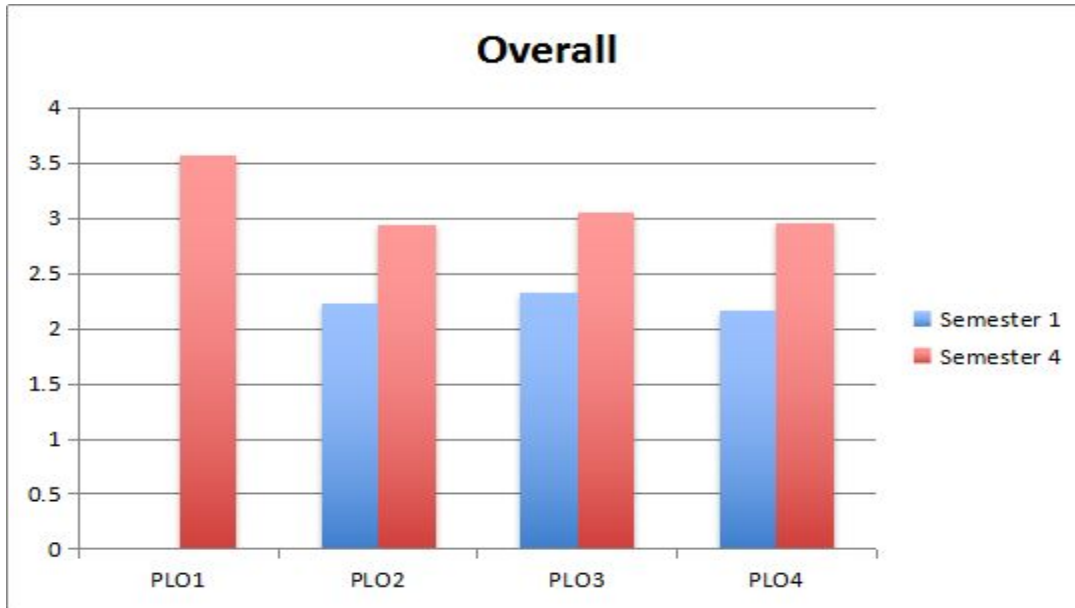


Figure 1. Average PLO scores of two cohorts combined

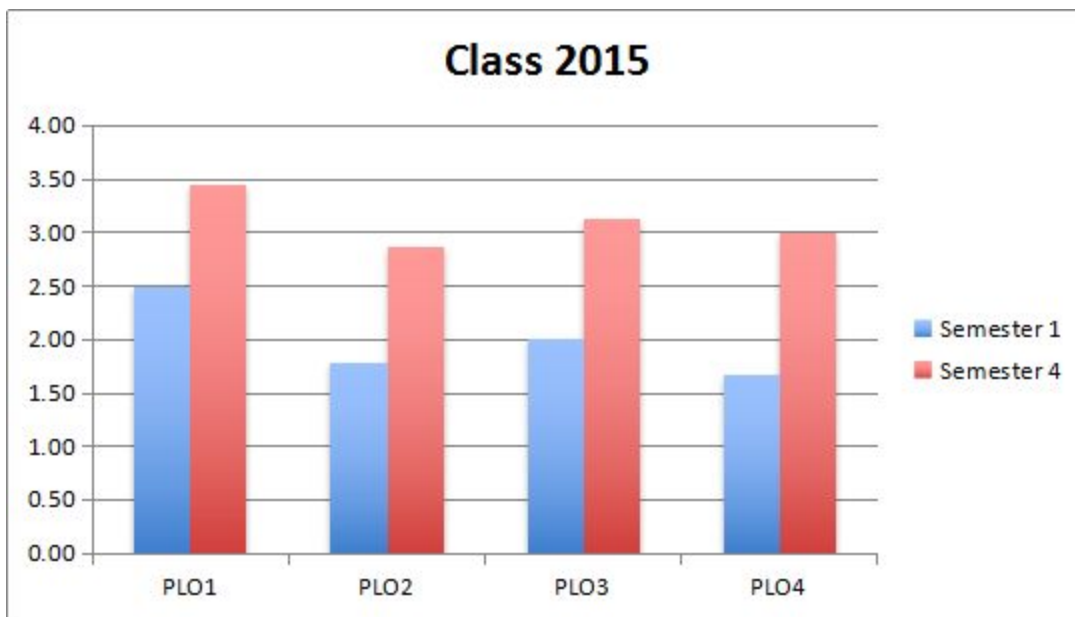


Figure 2. Average PLO scores of Class 2015

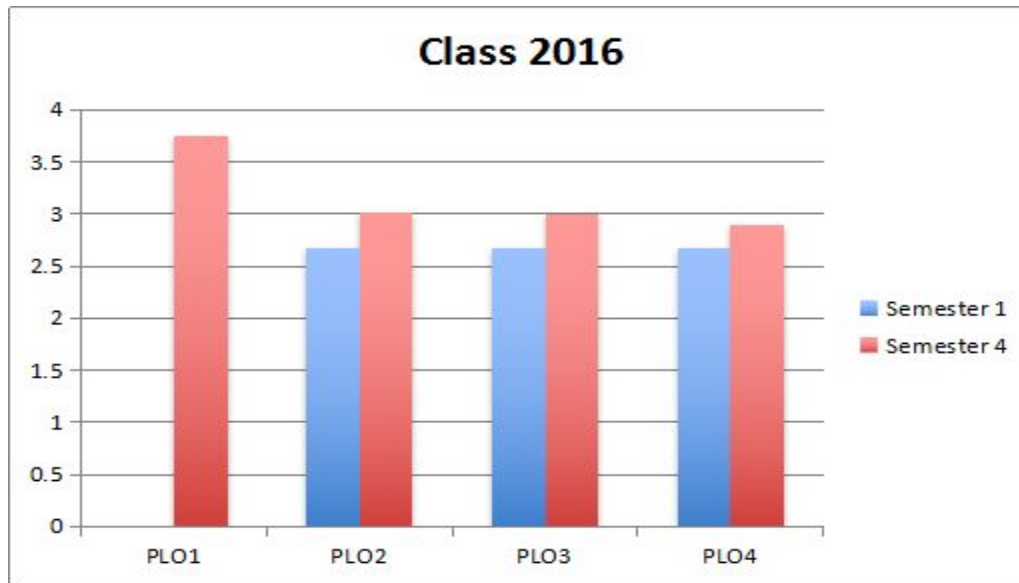


Figure 3. Average PLO scores of Class 2016

### **Feedback from Readers**

#### **Instructional issues**

**Strengths:** Readers found that students largely demonstrate growth as thinkers in their final semester of the MA program. From their first to final semesters in the program, a deepening of insight is often apparent in their writing. Students tend to engage in more complex ideas and draw more interesting connections in their final semester than when they first entered the program. Frequently, students demonstrate an ability to tease out implications of their insights more broadly and attempt to synthesize more worldviews. An emergence of the students' individual voices becomes more apparent and the content of their writing more original.

**Concerns:** While students grew as thinkers, they did not necessarily grow as writers. For example, some fourth semester papers were written with about the same level of writing skill as the student's first semester papers, and in some cases with even less skill than was demonstrated in the first semester papers. As the students increased their capacity for insight, it became harder for them to express their insights proportionally well; it seems that their intellectual capacity improved while their ability to articulate lagged behind.

The prompts given to students appear to be variable in terms of how structured they are. Some students seem to need more focused and specific prompts, as evidenced by unfocused or meandering writing. It is possible that there is a need for different types of writing support (conceptual, structural, mechanical). Additionally, students often wrote better for a particular class: Comparative Hermeneutics. This could be due to a variety of factors, such as the subject, instruction, prompt, or writing support.

**Action Items:** For classes that tend to have higher quality papers, practices need to be investigated in order to better understand the cause of this variance. Instructors need to improve

their prompts and develop better rubrics for grading papers; the expectations for students need to be more clearly articulated. PLO 1 needs to be clarified and included in instruction and assignments. To increase the quality of prompts and their consistency with the PLOs, one proposed solution is that the teaching Faculty form small prompt working groups. In these groups, Faculty members can discuss issues in the development of effective prompts and provide feedback. Another proposal is to conduct a Faculty training workshop on prompt development. This workshop would be devoted to training Faculty on how to craft an effective prompt and ensure that PLOs are present in writing assignments.

### **Instrumental Issues**

**Strengths:** Readers felt positive about the qualities assessed by the review process, seeing them as reflective of the overall program's goals. Additionally, the new process significantly streamlined the review. This approach should allow faculty to focus on the larger issues associated with meeting PLOs rather than getting caught up in discussions about individual papers. Lastly, this review gained additional input from two outside reviewers (i.e., reviewers unassociated with current DRBU instructional activities).

**Concerns:** Readers found specific criteria, as outlined in the tiers (cells) of the rubric, difficult to assess objectively. Many standards proved to be verbose, poorly differentiated by level, and lacking clearly-articulated evidentiary standards. This lack of clarity significantly slowed the process, forcing reviewers to evaluate learner papers and mentally parse rubric criteria simultaneously. As such, the absence of unambiguous evaluation measures resulted in a more subjective than objective review outcome.

Several critical areas for improvement were also noted. In particular, within the same standard, there is often a lack of cohesion across tiers. For instance, in PLO 2 - Explanation, tier 2 requires students to support their conclusions with "first-hand experiences that show genuine engagement"; however, this important criterion is entirely missing in tiers 1, 3, & 4. Additionally, the review team felt that the current standards underrepresent writing presentation/structure. This finding reflects the concerns mentioned above (i.e., concerns in instructional issues). As such, it is important in subsequent reviews to assess writing and presentation skills more thoroughly. Lastly, PLO 1 (ethical sensibility) was poorly represented in the papers reviewed. Indeed, only one paper out of the entire sample set addressed questions of ethics directly. Future writing prompts may need to focus more directly on ethics as a topic, especially in courses tasked with helping students achieve PLO 1.

**Action Items:** The qualities evaluated by the current PLOs are useful and appropriate; however, the rubrics lack precision. Streamlining the language of existing standards by evening out inconsistencies across tiers will allow for a greater ease of use. It will also be important to make sure each standard/tier has well articulated criteria. This standardization should improve the objectivity of our review outcomes, addressing concerns regarding writing support and ethics, without changing the intrinsic nature of the MA PLOs. Lastly, the benefits and risks of regularly employing outside reviewers should be discussed.

**Other comments:** It was communicated that some of the issues with the rubrics have been previously expressed, but remain unaddressed. Regarding student growth, it seems that there is always a change in the students' writing, but what that change is varies for each individual. It is unclear what the cause of this variability is.

As mentioned in the section on instructional issues, student work tends to improve in quality of content but not in presentation. It is unclear whether the cause of this is purely related to instructional issues, or whether other aspects are involved, such as issues in campus life, curriculum layout, end-of-program fatigue, or others.

Readers noted that some of the PLOs were difficult or impossible to score without having the prompts.

### **Proposed Action Items**

#### **Instruction:**

- Investigate practices of different courses to determine cause of variability in paper quality
- Improve paper prompts
- Develop better rubrics for grading papers
- Articulate expectations more clearly to students
- Include PLO 1 in instruction and assignments
- Form small working groups of teaching Faculty for development of prompts

#### **Instrument:**

- Streamline the language of the PLO rubrics by evening out inconsistencies across tiers
- Revise the rubrics to have more well articulated and objective criteria
- Include criteria for writing presentation and structure
- Improve the quality and effectiveness of prompts, for example with Faculty prompt working groups or a Faculty training workshop devoted to prompt writing
- Discuss the benefits and risks of regularly employing outside reviewers

#### **Other:**

- Collect paper prompts and include them in assessment packets for readers