# The Assessable Roo

## A UMKC Outcomes Assessment Newsletter

## Five Problems to Avoid in Writing Student Learning Outcomes

**By Barbara Glesner-Fines**

As the faculty of UMKC strive to improve student learning through the assessment process, it is perhaps appropriate to stop and assess our efforts in that regard. Here are five common problems that occur when first writing learning outcomes for a course:

1. Don't focus on you – focus on the students

Student learning outcomes are designed to tell students what the will be take away from a course. Avoid learning outcomes that describe what or how you will teach during the course and instead focus on what the students will be able to know, do, value, or believe at the end of the course.

**NOT: UMKC457**
**Trees as Thought**
Student learning outcome: *In this course, I will be exploring the philosophical thought experiment "If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?" I will explain my book "Trees as Focal Points for Reality" and refute critics of the proposals presented therein.*

**BETTER: UMKC457**
**Thought Experiments**
Student learning outcome: *At the end of this course,*

**To Go Boldly Where No Outcome Has Gone Before**



Courtesy greenleegazette.blogspot.com

*students will be able to think critically and communicate effectively about the metaphysical theories regarding the existence of that which cannot be perceived. Students will be able to describe how the theory of subjective idealism has impacted religious and scientific philosophy. Students will demonstrate increased ability to listen and understand viewpoints different from their own.*

2. Watch the Verbs
The verbs in learning outcomes tell the tale of outcomes. Verbs that describe what the students will do during the semester or the method of assessment (students will "read" "learn" "take a test" "write a paper"

etc.) may accurately describe the students' learning activities and assessment measures but not the learning outcomes that those activities will yield. Probably one of the most common verbs found in student learning outcomes is "understand," as in "students will understand [course content]." The problem with this as a learning outcome is that it is difficult to know what evidence would demonstrate that understanding. A student learning outcome that uses more active and concrete verbs can unpack the type and degree of "understanding" that a professor expects.

# Meet UMKC'S New Director of Assessment

**Dr. Ruth E. Cain, Ed.D.**

Dr. Ruth Cain will begin her appointment as the Director of Assessment at UMKC on February 2, 2015. Dr. Cain served for five years as the Assessment and Accreditation Coordinator at Indiana State University, working with academic and co-curricular programs to assess student learning achievement. She served as the team leader for ISU's HLC Assessment Academy project, which focuses on assessment of the general education program, and as the institutional lead for ISU's participation in the Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Assessment of Student Learning. Dr. Cain is a member of the peer review corps for the HLC.

Dr. Cain has a long association with UMKC and the Kansas City area. She received a master's degree in theatre design and technology from UMKC and worked for a number of years with the then Missouri Repertory Theatre and as a free-lance lighting designer with area theatres. She also worked in various academic and administrative roles at Rockhurst University. She holds a doctorate in higher education administration from the University of Kansas.

# Fall Semester Proves To Be Insightful and Productive

**By Jennifer Friend**

The authors of the book *Assessment in Practice* stated that, "institutional assessment efforts should not be concerned about valuing what can be measured but, instead, about measuring that which is valued" (Banta, Lund, Black & Oblander, 1996, p. 5). At UMKC, assessment of student learning is a core value that promotes excellence in student learning opportunities, high-quality teaching within academic programs, and the continuation of institutional and program accreditation. Diverse academic assessment initiatives involving faculty collaboration encourage reflection on the ways in which our core values as an institution, and the mission and goals of each program, are reflected in the curriculum, instructional pedagogies, and assessment of student learning outcomes.

During the Fall 2014 and Spring 2015 semesters, faculty who teach undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs are identifying "that which is valued" through the development of student learning outcomes (SLOs) for all courses in the UMKC catalog. The campus-wide deadline for undergraduate course SLOs is February 1, 2015 and graduate and professional course SLOs will be submitted by May 1, 2015. The course SLOs will be available to all faculty through the new CourseLeaf curriculum management system, and SLOs will be communicated to students through the course syllabi. There are many resources to support the design of SLOs available on the UMKC Assessment website, including a brief video tutorial: http://www.umkc.edu/assessment/resources.cfm

Another collaborative assessment endeavor is facilitated through the annual continuous improvement process in the WEAVE online system. Assessment coordinators work together with program faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders to make revisions to goals, program SLOs, curriculum maps, generate an annual assessment report, and create an assessment narrative that is reviewed by faculty members serving on the University Assessment Committee (UAC). Each program receives feedback using a two-page rubric that addresses the mission, goals, learning outcomes, assessment measures, findings, and action plan. The UAC encourages assessment coordinators to upload information into the WEAVE online system throughout the year, making changes to program information and adding findings at the end of each semester. Mark your calendars - the deadline for WEAVE online reports for the 2014-15 assessment cycle will be October 15, 2015.

The UMKC General Education Curriculum Committee (GECC) members, with leadership from Gerald Wyckoff and Lynda Plamann, have been hard at work during the Fall 2014 semester to facilitate assessment of General Education learning outcomes with Anchor, Focus, and Discourse instructors. As we implement the second year of the Gen Ed curriculum, Anchor and Focus courses will continue to be assessed once each year using the General Education Course Assessment Report template that demonstrates student learning findings relative to the Gen Ed learning outcomes associated with the course. Rhiannon Dickerson, Discourse Coordinator, is facilitating Discourse assessment efforts, and also helped to create a new series of short videos featuring UMKC students, instructors, and librarians sharing their discourse perspectives. We encourage you to view and share the links to these videos: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLC6lGUBDd9BFfTYpJCR8d7ILDMdLxs_yj

Assessment at the undergraduate level also includes the RooWriter online writing assessment, designed by the University Writing and Reading Board (UWRB). Crystal Doss, the Coordinator of Writing Assessment for UMKC,

# The How and Why of The New Program Evaluation Activities

**By Linda Garavalia**

As faculty, we spend considerable time developing expertise within our academic discipline. However, most faculty, with the exception of the School of Education faculty, have little or no formal preparation for teaching. Most faculty have never taken a course in instructional design or assessment. We may feel under-prepared to develop student learning outcomes (SLOs) or analyze program data. Not to minimize that concern, but there really is nothing to fear. Faculty have the necessary resources and skills to contribute to the pro-gram evaluation process in each aca-demic unit. While assisting a number of programs across campus over the past 15 years, I've been impressed with the rapidity with which faculty catch on to the program evaluation process. Terms like the 'instruction-assessment cycle' seem to cause some consternation. However, clos-ing the assessment loop is usually easier than the typical faculty mem-ber thinks. One barrier is the miscon-ception that the data are complex and require expertise in a particular re-search methodology or quantitative/ qualitative analysis technique. A more comfortable approach is to simply think of the instruction-assessment cycle as a step-by-step process whereby you make judg-ments at each step in the cycle. Fol-lowing is an example of how you might use this approach with a course within a program.

First, create your program outcomes. What should students be able to do upon earning a degree in the pro-gram? These outcomes are generally identified through discussions among program faculty. No sophisticated data analytics are needed. Second, write course objectives that contrib-ute to the program outcomes. What

> "Faculty have the necessary resources and skills to contribute to the program evaluation process in each academic unit."

are you teaching students to do or know that is foundational to what they will be able to do upon graduation? Document the connection between your course outcomes and your pro-gram outcomes (e.g. create a two col-umn table with program outcomes and related course outcomes in the adjacent column). Your course may only con-tribute to one or two program out-comes. That's okay. Here's where as-sessment is really important. Course outcomes need to be assessed (e.g. multiple choice test questions, essays, presentations, pop quizzes, small group work assignments, performance, etc.). Add another column to your table and indicate how the course outcome is assessed. Third, review your course data (e.g. student grades on assess-ments, questions in class, areas of con-fusion, performance of skills) and identify instances where you think students really mastered the outcomes and also areas where you believe stu-dent learning was weak. Fourth, modi-fy your instruction for the next offering of the course based on this analysis. Continue to do the things that resulted in mastery. Work on the instruction related to the areas of weakness. Docu-ment all of the above to provide evi-dence of course review for program improvement.

Another barrier to gathering program

evaluation data may be a lack of awareness as to why we as faculty need to provide this information to the university. The answer is com-plex, but, in short, it's because the landscape of higher education has changed dramatically over the past 10 to 15 years. An accountability movement began for K-12 education in the 1970s and has now reached higher education. There are a number of reasons for the current accounta-bility movement in higher education. For example, in 2009, the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) published *Toward effective practice: Discouraging degree mills in higher education*. The report out-lines the harm caused by these enti-ties: "Degree mills harm students and society. Students who are unknowing victims of degree mills are harmed when they invest a considerable amount of money for credits or cre-dentials that cannot be used for, e.g., transfer to another institution, entry to graduate school or employment. Society is harmed when fraudulent credentials are issued in areas that put public health and safety at risk, e.g., engineering or the health-related professions. The international work of legitimate higher education pro-viders – reliable evaluation of cre-dentials, successful transfer of credit, reconciling differences in degree structure – is undermined by degree mills" (p. 2).

Another factor contributing to de-mands for accountability is that little is known about what students know and can do as a result of a post-secondary degree (unless the degree leads to professional licensure or certification). Some states are mov-ing towards measuring "educational capital" or the knowledge and skills that students develop as a result of

# RooWriter as a Diagnostic and Learning Tool

As of late September 2014, RooWriter allows faculty to run reports to see the RooWriter Writing Assessment results for students in their classes.
What can you do with this information?
**RooWriter as a Diagnostic Tool**

At any point during the semester, or even before the semester begins, you can log in to the RooWriter site, and run a report on all students registered in your courses. From your report, you can gauge student performance on six scales:

- **Point/Purpose /Idea**
- **Depth & Breadth of Analysis –**
- **Critical Thinking**
- **Support – Evidence – Citations**
- **Style – Audience – Interest\**
- **Clarity/Cohesion of Structure**
- **Organization**

Knowing how students are performing in these areas can help your tailor your course to suit their needs. For instance, if the report indicates that many of the students are struggling with "Grammar – Usage – Mechanics" or "Style – Audience – Interest" you can build an extra workshop day into your syllabus that is led by you or consultant from the UMKC Writing Studio. If you notice that a large portion of students are struggling with "Support – Evidence – Citations," you can add a library consultation for your students into your syllabus or assign modules from Research Essentials. In short, RooWriter reports allows you to tailor your syllabus to the address the strengths and weaknesses that writers bring to the classroom.
**RooWriter as a Learning Tool**

By asking students to reflect on their RooWriter essays, you also can integrate RooWriter as part of formative assessment to begin the semester.
For instance, you could ask students to write a short reflection essay on the writing process they used when writing their RooWriter essay or to address the feedback they received in their evaluation reports. This type of reflection assignment is could be used as a low-stakes homework assignment to begin the semester and introduce discussions of writing processes in a Writing Intensive (WI) course. In addition, such an assignment establishes a connection across the curriculum between the Discourse sequence Student Learning Outcomes, the RooWriter, and WI courses. Such a reflection assignment also provides students a baseline reflection document early in the semester to which they can return when writing reflective essays for a portfolio, if a writing portfolio is part of the class. If students are not creating portfolios, they can use a reflection on the RooWriter to set goals for themselves as writers, and then at the end of the semester, they can reflect upon how well they've met those goals through the work assigned in the course.  Because the focus is on the writing process, not the content of the reading packet, it does not matter which reading packet the student chose to write about. How have you used RooWriter to improve student learning? Send ideas and questions to the Coordinator of Writing Assessment, Crystal Doss, at RooWriter@umkc.edu.

~ Crystal Doss

**Save The Date**
**Annual Weave Online assessment due date has been moved to October  15, 2015**

**Faculty and Assessment Coordinators are Encouraged to review and make updates to Fall 2014 goals, outcomes, measures, and findings in Spring 2015.**

**Reminder**
**General Education Anchor and Focus course assessment reports from Fall 2014 due February 1, 2015. Spring/Summer 2015 due October 1, 2015.**

# Five Problems (Continued from Page 1)

**NOT: LAW8000**
**Family Law**
Student learning outcome: *Students will read Smith, Jones, & Brown, Family Law Foundations (2013) and will understand the law regarding marriage regulation and the constitutional constraints on that regulation and the law of divorce, including child custody. Students will write a divorce petition and parenting plan.*

**BETTER: LAW 8000**
**Family Law**
Student learning outcome: *At the end of this course, students will be able to: identify the legal issues raised by a fact pattern involving a marriage regulation, make critical and effective arguments regarding the meaning of that regulation and its constitutional validity, and confidently predict the outcome of a challenge to that regulation and identify relevant facts necessary to gather from a client seeking a divorce and child custody with property including real estate and pensions; draft a complete and legally effective petition for that divorce and custody action, including a parenting plan; and identify legal issues and make critical and effective arguments, applying the statutory and case law, to determine the divorce, property division, child custody and economic support in the case.*

To read more about learning outcomes and student

"understanding", see Chapter Two, Understanding Understanding, of GRANT WIGGINS & JAY MCTIGHE, UNDERSTANDING BY DESIGN (2nd Ed. 2005) available online at http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/103055/chapters/Understanding-Understanding.aspx.

3. Avoid "elementitis"
A student learning outcome should not merely summarize the syllabus or be a list of topics the course will cover. Rather, the student learning outcomes should focus on thematic elements that tie these topics together or ways in which the students will be able to use this knowledge. As David Perkins of the Harvard Graduate School of Education notes:
We educators always face the challenge of helping our students approach complex skills and ideas. So what to do? The two most familiar strategies are learning by elements and learning about. In the elements approach, we break down the topic or skill into elements and teach them separately, putting off the whole game until later — often much later....to have a little fun I call it 'elementitis.'
DAVID PERKINS, MAKING LEARNING WHOLE: HOW SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF TEACHING CAN TRANSFORM EDUCATION (2010). Avoid student learning outcomes that are plagued by "elementitis" and describe instead what it is students will be able to do with course coverage.

**NOT: UMKC200**
**History of the 22nd Century**
Student learning outcome: *We will cover major historical events and figures of the 22nd Century including:*
*Warp Drive Technology and Exploration of Artificial Intelligence*
*Vulcan Diplomatic Ties*
*Earth-Romulan War*
*United Federation of Planets*

**BETTER: UMKC200**
**History of the 22nd Century**
Student learning outcome: *At the end of this course, students will be able to: Describe how technological factors created a post-scarcity economy and culture in the 22nd century; Analyze the concept of "citizenship" and "state" and the impact of recognition of non-human species on evolution of that that concept; and Critique the Prime Directive (non-interference) as a foundational value for exploration.*
*4.* Don't Always Expect Mastery
Student learning outcomes should indicate not only the content the students will learn but how well they will learn it. We cannot aim for mastery of all aspects of the course. Rather, learning outcomes in some courses are necessarily going to be at an introductory level (students will "recognize" or "describe" or "identify") while other outcomes may be aimed at higher levels of mastery. An effective tool to determine the proficiency level of your learning outcomes is Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, which provides a hierarchy of increasingly sophisticated learning outcomes. To

# UMKC

# Assessment Down Under

## Friend on Assessment in Fall 2014  (Cont from Page 2)

will be facilitating two break-out sessions at the FaCET conference on January 15, 2015 at the Kauffman Center. One session will focus on exploring plagiarism, and another session will provide an overview of the individual student RooWriter results to support writing achievement in WI and higher-level undergraduate courses. For information about the

FaCET conference, visit: http://www.umkc.edu/provost/facet/  To learn more about the RooWriter, visit https://www.umkc.edu/RooWriter/logon.aspx .

I would like to thank the many colleagues who have offered their expertise during this semester to continue our positive momentum with UMKC assessment efforts. In particular, Dan

Stroud, Graduate Assistant for Assessment, and Barbara Glesner-Fines, FaCET Faculty Assessment Mentor, who have made so many contributions during this transition period. I welcome the new Director for Assessment, Dr. Ruth Cain, who brings expertise and experience to inspire new ideas for our UMKC community to "measure that which is valued."

~ Jennifer Friend

## Five Problems to Avoid With SLOs

read more about it and see a list of verbs associated with differing levels of learning, see Rex Heer, *A Model of Learning Objectives* from Iowa State University Center for Excellence in Learning & Teaching (2012) at http://www.celt.iastate.edu/pdfs-docs/teaching/RevisedBloomsHandout.pdf.

**5.** Don't Avoid Outcomes that May be Difficult to Measure

Student learning outcomes for a class rarely will focus entirely on the acquisition of knowledge.  At a minimum, most classes expect students to develop their cognitive and communication skills in using the knowledge base of the course. Courses may also help students to clarify values, reconsider beliefs, appreciate new perspectives, or develop greater self-awareness.  Some faculty recognize that these skills and values are some of the most important benefits that students take away from the courses, but are reluctant to state these as learning outcomes because they are unable to "test" these outcomes.  However, any important skill or value can be assessed – even if there is a good deal of subjectivity involved in that assessment.  By stating these objectives

## New Program Evaluation Activities (Continued from Page 3)

their investment of time and money in a degree. The federal government is interested in student learning outcomes because it contributes funding to higher education, primarily through student loans, with the expectation that graduates will become productive citizens and will pay back the investment. The student learning outcomes and program evaluation data that our faculty provide are necessary for the university to meet the information

requirements of external entities, such as our university accrediting body and the US Department of Education. The good news is that we have the resources we need to complete the program evaluation work. Faculty across campus have considerable expertise in teaching and assessment.  We have FACET to provide programming and more formalized support with regularly scheduled sessions and consults with experts. It's just a matter of breaking the process down and approaching it step-by-step.

~ Linda Garavalia

## Continued from Page 5

as learning outcomes, faculty members can challenge themselves and their students to more clearly describe the dimensions of this learning.  Measurements of this learning may be through written reflections, observations of performance, or surveys of opinions.  These are perfectly valid assessment tools. As an example, read more about our colleague's work in the conservatory in assessing artistry.  Sabrina Madison-

Cannon, *How to Assess a Swan...,* 2:4 The Assessable Roo 1 (Dec. 13, 2013) at http://www.umkc.edu/assessment/downloads/newsletter-dec-2013.pdf.

Well written student learning outcomes can create a shared sense of mission in a course that makes both teaching and learning more enjoyable and effective.

~ Barbara Glesner-Fines