General Education Annual Course Assessment Form

Course Number/Title ANTH 12 Human Evolution  GE Area: Core B2
Results reported for AY 2011-2012  # of section: 7, w/ 2 @ 120 students)
# of instructors: 4

Course Coordinator: Elizabeth Weiss  E-mail: Elizabeth.Weiss@sjsju.edu
Department Chair: Chuck Darrah  College: Social Sciences

Instructions: Each year, the department will prepare a brief (two page maximum) report that documents the assessment of the course during the year. This report will be electronically submitted, by the department chair, to the Office of Undergraduate Studies, with an electronic copy to the home college by September 1 of the following academic year.

Part 1
To be completed by the course coordinator:

1. What SLO(s) were assessed for the course during the AY?

   Area B2 SLO #3: recognize methods of science, in which quantitative, analytical reasoning techniques are used.

2. What were the results of the assessment of this course? What were the lessons learned from the assessment?

   The assignment utilized to assess SLO 3 is to write a 500 word essay on the how to define a species. Paleoanthropologists debate species names, so this assignment is intended to give students an insight to the naming of a species. They sign-up for a specific fossil species that is listed on the sign-up sheet in class and look up that the holotype (which is the specific fossil used to define the species) for that particular species. Then, they find the article that introduces the new species to the scientific community with the holotype and write how anthropologists examine the holotype fossil to name the species. Students are required to give information about the holotype (where it was found, who found it, what parts of the skeleton it includes), discuss the traits used to define the holotype and address controversies surrounding the holotype using original research (primary, peer-reviewed) sources from journals rather than relying on just one source of information, the textbook, or the internet.

   Most students were able to find the resources to write the paper in Weiss’s section, but in one section students needed much guidance to find appropriate references. In all sections, it seemed that students learned how to use scientific journals to gather information about a brand new topic, but some students had difficulty understanding and recognizing the methods employed. They had even more difficulty understanding how the naming of species applies to the scientific method and the analytical reasoning techniques utilized. There were, however, in all sections a small number of individuals who wrote good analytical critiques of the studies' hypotheses and the methods employed therein; these students obviously obtained the learning objective.

   Poor writing skills may hamper professors' ability to assess the learning objective outcomes.
Upon discussing writing assignments with a number of students, Weiss found they actually understood more than their papers would imply. On the other hand, some students used the scientific terms without understanding them at all. Students experience anxiety over grammatical issues and yet they do not seem to read the comments made about these issues on earlier assignments. They look at the grade, but do not examine why they received the grade.

3. What modifications to the course, or its assessment activities or schedule, are planned for the upcoming year? (If no modifications are planned, the course coordinator should indicate this.)

In the next academic, students will be encouraged to examine the reasons for their grades closely, with methods to be discussed with the course instructors. In AY 2012-2013 course instructors (except for the coordinator) will change; a new discussion on the assignments will be necessary. One method may be to have students write one paper in three steps that will require them to fix the problems of previous papers. Another method may be to take extra points off for making the same mistake on two different assignments.

We will continue to use the paleoanthropology section for LO3, but the assignment description will be amended to place the focus on validity of a species and taxonomy rather than specific holotypes.

The department will assess learning objective #1 in AY 2012-2013.

Part 2
To be completed by the department chair (with input from course coordinator as appropriate):

4. Are all sections of the course still aligned with the area Goals, Student Learning Objectives (SLOs), Content, Support, and Assessment? If they are not, what actions are planned?

The course coordinator provides both prototypical assessment assignments and opportunities for discussions about them with the instructors. The course is a standard lower division introduction to physical anthropology and most texts are remarkably similar, and both assignments and lecture topics, too, are similar in different universities. This standardization contributes to consistency and the coordinator’s active involvement in providing detailed instructions for assignments guarantees alignment. The faculty will also review the lessons reported here regarding students’ comprehension of the rationale for grades as part of a broader discussion about helping students gain control over their own life-long learning.
General Education Annual Course Assessment Form

Course Number/Title ANTH 012 Human Evolution

GE Area B2

Results reported for AY 2012-2013

# of sections: 6

# of instructors: 3

Course Coordinator: Elizabeth Weiss

E-mail: elizabeth.weiss@sjsu.edu

Department Chair: Chuck Darrah

College: Social Sciences

Instructions: Each year, the department will prepare a brief (two page maximum) report that documents the assessment of the course during the year. This report will be electronically submitted, by the department chair, to the Office of Undergraduate Studies, with an electronic copy to the home college by September 1 of the following academic year.

Part 1

To be completed by the course coordinator:

(1) What SLO(s) were assessed for the course during the AY?

Student Learning Objective #1: Students should be able to use the methods of science and knowledge derived from current scientific inquiry in life or physical science to question existing explanations.

Area B2 Life Science courses focus on:

- structures and functions of living organisms;
- levels of organization of living systems, from atom to planet;
- strategies for survival and reproduction;
- patterns of evolution;
- principles of genetics, including the basis for variation; and
- interaction of organisms and their natural environment.

(2) What were the results of the assessment of this course? What were the lessons learned from the assessment?

For each of the sections, a writing assignment was used to assess the SLO. All three instructors reported that the students did learn to question existing explanations by examining knowledge derived from scientific inquiry.

For the large ANTH012 section, the assignment used to assess SLO1 was a 500 word (2-page) writing assignment on changing perspectives of nonhuman primates. Often students think that nonhuman primates are very different from ourselves and lack complex lives; thus, I opted to assign several articles to challenge these existing preconceptions. The four articles assigned include one on chimpanzee mating, one on orangutan mating, one on grey mouse lemur mating, and one on chimpanzee language. Students choose one article and describe the new knowledge that is presented in the article; they are required to explain how this knowledge was obtained (i.e., which methods were used and how does it fit with the scientific explanation) and how that knowledge has made themselves and others question our understanding of nonhuman primates. Most students did well on this assignment; they grasped that previous information about these primates portrayed them more simply, but that new information showed that nonhuman primates...
are complex and it made them reassess their concepts of abstract language or mating strategies. It also allowed students to see how individual variation exists in the primate world; e.g., not all chimpanzees are identical. And, finally, this assignment enabled students to question how much of our behavior is evolved, genetic and, therefore, shared with our closest relatives (the nonhuman primates).

Another assignment was similar; students wrote a three page essay about chimpanzees’ culture with the use of four assigned readings. In their essay, students were encouraged to challenge the popular idea of culture as a unique human behavior. In their essays, the majority of the students were able to critically evaluate different definitions of culture and point out that if we consider culture as socially, not genetically, transmitted behaviors both chimpanzees and some other animals also have it. By discussing the topic briefly in class students produced more organized, complex, and better structured essays.

All instructors agreed that assigning specific articles rather than have students find their articles helped students focus on the learning objective rather than on the search for materials.

(3) What modifications to the course, or its assessment activities or schedule, are planned for the upcoming year? (If no modifications are planned, the course coordinator should indicate this.)

Previous years, it was a struggle to get students to read the comments more closely; this year students more often read the comments since they were only allowed to discuss their papers after they could show that they had read them. Most students writing improved as a result. Next time, it should be emphasized to the students that the instructors can see whether they just glanced at their grade or took the time to read the comments since turnitin.com has an icon that signifies if students have spent over a minute looking at their paper. Additionally, it is important to add new reading material or switch reading materials to keep up with the ever changing field; one or two newly published articles will be added to the reading lists for the essay assignments.

Part 2

To be completed by the department chair (with input from course coordinator as appropriate):

(4) Are all sections of the course still aligned with the area Goals, Student Learning Objectives (SLOs), Content, Support, and Assessment? If they are not, what actions are planned?

Yes. GE coordinator Weiss meets regularly with the instructors and the department integrates assessment discussions into regular faculty meetings. In addition, the course is one that is offered consistently throughout the CSU and California community colleges and the department’s instructors are highly experienced in the course content and learning objectives. No actions are planned except that the 2013-2014 assessment will be initiated by the department chair since Prof. Weiss is on sabbatical.