



March 2014

ASSIGNMENT ALIGNMENT IMPROVES CRITICAL THINKING ASSESSMENT

By Jerry Smith

Faculty experience during the Core Objectives Assessment Team (COAT) assessment days has resulted in some suggested guidelines for effective assessment assignments.

1. Individual assignments need to provide students with an opportunity to demonstrate the observable behaviors listed as desirable for each of the 3-5 rubric elements.
2. Assignments should be capable of being saved as an “artifact” for assessment, with preference for a digital archived file, equivalent to 1-3 pages long. This could include photos, montages, oral recordings, and videos, in addition to the more common text document.
3. During COAT’s past assessment workdays, the artifacts from which we could best measure Critical Thinking came from courses in which all Faculty assigned only two or three topics designed to clearly elicit from students a demonstration of their Critical Thinking skills, including the following actions:
 - A. Form an opinion (Creativity: New perspectives)
 - B. Base opinion on facts (Research: Comprehensive use of data)
 - C. Identify facts relevant to opinion (Identification: Analysis)
 - D. Show multiple reasons to support opinion (Presentation: Show view & research)
 - E. Summarize the opinion as a conclusion (Conclusion: Supported by evidence).
4. The student papers most amenable to rating with the Critical Thinking rubric were those in which students were required to give a Pro/Con opinion of a known figure’s historical actions. The COAT raters could thus compare dozens of papers to each other, getting a better grasp of the data available to the students and the multiple facts that could encourage and support different points of view. Moreover, having all students write on a limited number of specific topics built the COAT assessors’ ability to rate whether the student successfully used facts to form an opinion, present it, and conclude their premise. That is, the assessors became “knowledgeable” at knowing a full range of facts, which enabled them to determine if the students used the full range of facts. In short, we quickly became experts on topics which we may not have known, developing our knowledge just as the students initially developed theirs in the classroom. Using a larger quantity of similar assignments contributed to Faculty reviewer reliability by reducing the learning curves required when going from one assignment to another.
5. Some Associate Faculty are in favor of assigning a topic to a group of students. This could allow assessment of more than one core objective by a single assignment. For example, Teamwork could be assessed at the same time as Critical Thinking by the team members exchanging multiple views on a thesis and bringing these views to a final conclusion.
6. We recommend that Faculty, especially Associate Faculty, create a pool of questions or topics for their department that can be used, or adapted, by Faculty as an appropriate assignment or exam.