

Communication as a Learning Outcome in Graduate Education

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"We wish there was more support at GSU for improving these skills at the graduate level. We have focused on this internally, but would appreciate a university-driven initiative."

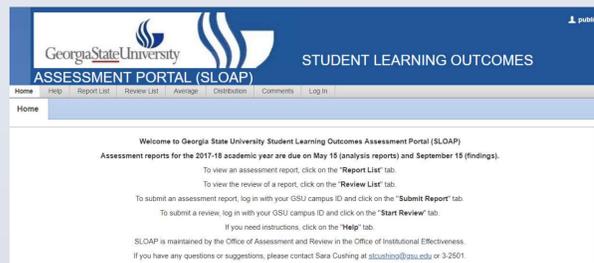
Statement of the Problem

At the undergraduate level, effective communication orally and in writing is nearly always explicitly named as a learning outcome. Graduate programs, varying as they do much more than undergraduate programs, may or may not include effective communication as a student learning outcome, even though most faculty would agree that communication is essential to professional success in virtually any field. In this exploratory study, we examined the SLOs of graduate programs at a research university in the Southeastern United States. We calculated the percentage of programs that include effective communication (oral, written, or both) in their SLOs and documented how communication was assessed. Next, we surveyed programs that do not include effective communication as an SLO to explore reasons for not doing so. We present the results of our investigation along with suggestions for whether and how to include communication as a learning outcome in graduate programs.

Context of the Study

Georgia State University, 52,000+ students, nine colleges with graduate programs

All programs required to report annually on SLO assessment
Reports are publicly available on the SLOAP portal (see screenshot)



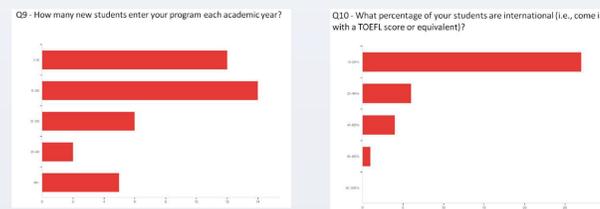
Research Questions

1. What percentage of graduate programs have explicit reference to oral and/or written communication in their SLOs?
2. What reasons do programs give for not assessing communication?
3. How do respondents perceive the role of oral and written communication in their programs and in the workforce?

Data

1. Manual identification of communication-related SLOs from 2017 assessment reports (N=97)
2. Qualtrics survey of assessment reporters in graduate programs (40 responses)

College	Reports	Survey
Arts & Sciences/Arts	33	13
Education	39	9
Nursing, Public Health & Biomedical Institute	10	6
Business, Policy & Law	15	5
No response	N/A	7
Total	97	40



Results

RQ1: What percentage of graduate programs have explicit reference to oral and/or written communication in their SLOs?

Out of 97 reports reviewed, 42 (43%) included at least one SLO related to communication. Of these, 8 (8%) did not specify modality (i.e., speaking/writing). Only one program had an SLO related specifically to writing without an SLO related to oral communication.

EXAMPLE SLOS IDENTIFIED BY RESEARCHERS:

Students communicate effectively orally and in writing in a context relevant to scientific research using appropriate formats and styles for scientific journals, meetings, conference, or colloquia. (BOTH ORAL AND WRITTEN)

Demonstrate effective communication skills. (MODALITY NOT SPECIFIED)

Critical Thinking Through Writing: Students will demonstrate critical thinking skills through innovative, well-organized arguments. This means that students will structure their papers and thesis proposals in a clear and coherent fashion and that students will demonstrate proficiency in overall writing and grammar skills, including syntax, punctuation, and citation. (WRITING ONLY)

SURVEY QUESTIONS

- Q1 - Please refer to the list of student learning outcomes (SLOs) that was sent in your cover letter. Are these SLOs still current?
 Q2 - Do you have an SLO related to oral communication? Answer "yes" if you interpret the SLO to include oral communication even if it is not explicitly mentioned.
 Q2a - If yes, please identify the SLO by number
 Q3 - Do you have an SLO related to written communication? Answer "yes" if you interpret the SLO to include written communication even if it is not explicitly mentioned.
 Q3a - If yes, please identify the SLO by number

However, 70% (28/40) of survey respondents reported that they have an SLO related to oral communication and 93% (37/40) reported an SLO related to writing.

For the 32 respondents who identified their program we were able to make a direct comparison:

Researchers/Self-report	Oral	Written
No/No	6	5
Yes/Yes	19	19
No/Yes	7	8
Total	32	32
% Same	78%	75%
% Different	22%	25%

EXAMPLE SLOS IDENTIFIED BY DEPARTMENTS AS ASSESSING WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Arts & Sciences

1. Producing original research: Students identify a novel problem within their subfield, design a research methodology and lay out a feasible research protocol.
2. Synthesizing, analyzing and critiquing knowledge: Students frame their research interests in the broader literature and debates of the discipline
3. Standard of ethical research: Students assess the ethical implications of their projects and identify and address potential ethical challenges to their research

Education

1. Demonstrates research expertise – the Ph.D. student demonstrates a general research competence including expertise in at least one research paradigm.
2. Engages in scholarship – the Ph.D. student engages in scholarship and creates new knowledge about teaching and learning in his/her major discipline of inquiry.
3. Understands foundations of education – the Ph.D. student demonstrates an in-depth understanding of forces such as historical, social, political, psychological, and economic influences that affect education today.
5. Develops and demonstrates an extended knowledge base – the Ph.D. student develops and demonstrates an extended knowledge base that is associated with or that supports the major discipline of inquiry.

RQ2: What reasons do programs give for not assessing communication?



COMMENTS:

Our MA program includes an oral thesis defense, and students are encouraged to present research in the department's annual Graduate Research Symposium and other avenues, however oral presentation is not a main assessment strategy

Measuring oral communication in a way that reflects the context may be a challenge.

MA students will engage in oral presentations as a part of their coursework, but this particular skill is not emphasized by our current program

RQ3: How do respondents perceive the role of oral and written communication in their programs and in the workforce?

#	Field	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
1	Strong ORAL communication skills are an essential ENTRANCE requirement for students in this program.	25.00%	52.50%	20.00%	15.00%	7.50%
2	Strong WRITTEN communication skills are an essential ENTRANCE requirement for students in this program.	50.00%	32.50%	7.50%	7.50%	2.50%
3	ORAL communication skills are emphasized in coursework in this program.	42.50%	35.00%	15.00%	7.50%	0.00%
4	WRITTEN communication skills are emphasized in coursework in this program.	50.00%	35.00%	0.00%	2.50%	0.00%
5	Students who enter our program with low ORAL skills have difficulty in their coursework.	10.00%	45.00%	32.50%	7.50%	0.00%
6	Students who enter our program with low WRITING skills have difficulty in their coursework.	47.50%	40.00%	10.00%	2.50%	0.00%
7	Students whose native language is not English have difficulty with ORAL communication in this program.	7.69%	43.59%	28.21%	12.82%	7.69%
8	Students whose native language is not English have difficulty with WRITTEN communication in this program.	12.50%	47.50%	15.00%	17.50%	7.50%
9	ORAL communication skills are essential for students entering the WORKFORCE after this program.	52.50%	32.50%	10.00%	5.00%	0.00%
10	WRITTEN communication skills are essential for students entering the WORKFORCE after this program.	45.00%	32.50%	2.50%	0.00%	0.00%
11	Our faculty are skilled at assessing SPEAKING.	25.00%	50.00%	10.00%	15.00%	0.00%
12	Our faculty are skilled at assessing WRITING.	50.00%	32.50%	2.50%	0.00%	0.00%
13	Our faculty are skilled at addressing student problems with ORAL communication.	25.00%	45.00%	12.50%	17.50%	0.00%
14	Our faculty are skilled at addressing student problems with WRITTEN communication.	50.00%	27.50%	10.00%	2.50%	0.00%

"I think oral skills are really important, yet I never thought about the fact that we don't really teach them. We teach presentations and we know how to correct issues with oral communication, but this is definitely something we could all improve upon in my department."

Summary & Discussion

- Most graduate departments recognize the importance of communication (particularly writing) in their fields and assess it.
- The main reason for not assessing oral communication is that other SLOs are a priority.
- Faculty feel somewhat less comfortable assessing oral communication than writing.
- A sizeable minority (up to 25%) do not assess communication skills apart from research skills
- Results with regard to international students complements applied linguistics research on the challenges of acquiring academic literacy (e.g., Braine, 2002; Li, 2012)

Limitations & Implications

- Small sample size makes findings tentative
- There appears to be room for improvement in assessing communication, particularly oral communication
- Separating research skills from communication skills may allow programs to design more nuanced interventions to improve both

References

- Braine, G. (2002). Academic literacy and the nonnative speaker graduate student. *Journal of English for academic purposes*, 1(1), 59-68.
- Li, Y. (2012). "I have no time to find out where the sentences came from; I just rebuild them": A biochemistry professor eliminating novices' textual borrowing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 21(1), 59-70.

