Communication as a Learning Outcome in Graduate Education

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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. Qualitative survey of assessment reports in graduate programs (40 responses)

Results
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, conferences, or colloquia. (BOTH ORAL AND WRITTEN)
- Demonstrate effective communication skills. (MODALITY NOT SPECIFIED)

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 complement 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 oral and written communication

References
Li, Y. (2012). “I have no time to find out where the sentences came from, I just rebuid them”: A biochemistry professor eliminating novice’s textual borrowing. Journal of Second Language Writing, 21(1), 59-70.