Drawing Learning Outcomes in Communication into Meaningful Practice

Learning

Outcomes

in

Communication

Project

ABOUT THE LOC PROJECT

The LOC project was funded by a generous grant from Lumina Foundation to the National Communication Association. The National Communication Association (NCA) advances Communication as the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media, and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific, and aesthetic inquiry. NCA serves the scholars, teachers, and practitioners who are its members by enabling and supporting their professional interests in research and teaching. NCA promotes the widespread appreciation of the importance of communication in public and private life, the application of competent communication to improve the quality of human life and relationships, and the use of knowledge about communication to solve human problems.

For more information about the NCA LOC project, including the process by which the LOCs were identified and articulated, visit www.natcom.org/LOC.

What Should a Graduate with a Communication Degree Know, Understand, and Be Able to Do?

This question guides NCA's Lumina Foundation-funded Learning Outcomes in Communication (LOC) project, a multi-year, faculty-driven initiative designed to articulate the core of the Communication discipline through a set of learning outcomes. The LOCs are meant to stimulate meaningful conversations among faculty members about enhancing curricular development in the interest of improving student learning. They are a starting point for conversations; they are not exhaustive or prescriptive. They are designed to be adapted by individual departments based on their particular imperatives and areas of focus. The LOCs are a foundation for effective assessment of student learning. Here, we provide three types of activities that will allow departments to draw LOCs into meaningful practice: curricular, stakeholder outreach, and employability-related activities.

LOC Activities for Departments

CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES ....

NCA's LOC project is geared toward not just clear definition of learning in the discipline, but also alignment of programmatic curricula and pedagogies to the statements of that learning. In LOC curricular activities, program faculty compare their own outcomes to the LOCs and then analyze the degree to which curricula and pedagogies are structured to enable students to learn and demonstrate learning of the individual department's particular iteration of the LOCs.

These core curricular activities are most effective if undertaken sequentially and collectively. While an individual might take the lead in initial comparison or mapping, program faculty should at the very least be included in the review and discussion of that work. The following activities prove to be most productive when undertaken as collective reflection regarding not just *whether*, but *how* a program is or is not constructed to support student attainment of learning in Communication.

1 Aligning Outcomes

While your department might simply adopt the LOCs as its program-level outcomes, you likely already have existing outcomes that have defined your activities. The ideal starting point for curricular alignment, therefore, is a comparison of the LOCs to the existing program-level learning outcomes or goals. The LOCs were developed by a consensus-building process that largely makes explicit what most faculty members in the discipline already hold to be the core learning in Communication. Your department's faculty will likely find a great deal of overlap between your own outcomes and the LOCs.

The exercise of aligning the two sets of outcomes enables your faculty to identify the degree to which your existing outcomes parallel those developed in the LOC project. In efforts from other disciplines, departments have located areas in their own outcomes that, in light of the discipline-wide outcomes, were determined to be insufficient or, conversely, areas where they felt their own outcomes surpassed those of the discipline outcomes.

As a process of collective reflection, asking questions such as those provided in the box below provides an opportunity to discuss how your department understands learning in the discipline in relation to the LOCs. Where your own outcomes seem to have gaps, as revealed by comparison to the LOCs, discussions will need to turn toward whether or not those gaps are important enough to prompt a revision of your existing outcomes, or adoption of LOCs that your existing outcomes do not include.

As may be apparent, the kinds of reflection undertaken in aligning outcomes provide a foundation for looking at the ways in which your program is built to encourage student learning. These lines of inquiry are foundational, as programs depend on clear articulations of learning on which intentional programs can be built. Having established your department's outcomes (either through adoption, revision, or validation), the logical next step is to analyze how the department's curriculum is constructed in relation to the accepted outcomes.

COMMON QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION WHEN ALIGNING OUTCOMES

- What do we understand the LOCs to mean?
- How do each of these outcomes appear in our own program-level outcomes?
- What makes the LOCs different from our own program-level outcomes?
- Are there any outcomes in one document that do not appear in the other? Why might that be?
- What changes do the LOCs suggest for our own program-level outcomes?

2 Curriculum Mapping

Curriculum mapping often takes the form of creating a table in which outcomes are arrayed along the top and courses in a program are arrayed along the left side, as in the example below. At the points of intersection between outcome and course, faculty members indicate whether the specific course attends to the specific outcome. There are different ways to identify how the course addresses an outcome: faculty might simply place an X in the box or, as in the example below, they might indicate whether a particular area of learning is introduced (I), developed (D), or mastered (M).

SAMPLE CURRICULUM MAPPING TABLE								
	Describe the Communication discipline and its central questions	Employ Communication theories, perspectives, principles, and concepts	Engage in Communication inquiry	Create messages appropriate to the audience, purpose, and context	Critically analyze messages	Demonstrate the ability to accomplish communicative goals (self-efficacy)	Apply ethical communication principles and practices	Utilize communication to embrace difference	Influence public discourse
COMM 101	I			I		I		I	
COMM 102		I		D		I	I		
COMM 201	D	D	I		I			D	I
COMM 301			D	M	D		D	M	
COMM 401	M	M	M			D	M		D

Be leery of too many ticked boxes. Courses rarely address every outcome in a meaningful way, and few outcomes are addressed in every course in a program. Curriculum mapping focuses on courses in which students' learning is actually assessed through some sort of assignment. Therefore, while each class in a program may address each of the outcomes, a box would be ticked only if the course includes an assignment by which students demonstrate their learning of an individual outcome. You may find disagreement about the particular purpose of a course. By discussing how the curriculum is constructed around the outcomes, faculty can create a shared understanding.

Curriculum maps are best completed—or at least reviewed—collectively, as this activity can help faculty begin to develop an explicit and shared understanding of how the program's curriculum is structured to help students attain the learning expressed in the outcomes. Two questions in particular promote a productive mapping exercise:

1. Which classes evaluate learning of this outcome?
2. How does each of those classes promote and evaluate learning of this outcome?

The first of these questions identifies where in the curriculum particular outcomes are addressed. Where a column has no ticked boxes, faculty will see that the curriculum does not target a particular outcome. Where a row has no ticked boxes, faculty will see that a course does not contribute to the core learning in the discipline. These are, obviously, extreme cases. Look for outcomes that appear to be under-addressed, or courses that seem to be underutilized. The second question encourages reflection about what kinds of pedagogies are used to promote student learning and what kinds of assignments students complete to demonstrate their learning. When faculty members identify types of pedagogy and assignment, they prepare themselves to think about aligned design of learning experiences, which is the subject of the next step in the sequence.

Supplemental Curricular Activities

CO-CURRICULAR MAPPING

Mapping co-curricular activities enables program faculty to understand the ways in which student clubs or curricular support activities within the department help to develop the learning defined in the LOCs or the department's program outcomes. Undertaken much the same way as curriculum mapping, co-curricular mapping arrays club activities in place of courses. Co-curricular mapping highlights the ways in which such activities enhance programs and can result in more intentional strategies to utilize program-related clubs toward student learning.

CATALOG PROGRAM RESOURCES

The Learning Outcomes in Communication project is not intended to create "cookie-cutter" programs. As indicated above, programs would do well to consider their own particular iterations of the LOCs, as programs have very different resources, student demographics, and missions. One way of developing a more explicit understanding of a specific program's character is to catalog its resources. "Resources" here does not mean financial capacity; rather, it refers to the areas of specialty in the faculty, the ability to involve undergraduates in faculty research projects, special collections in the library, and other distinguishing features of the program. Cataloging these resources can help faculty define the distinctive nature of their program, which can then be more clearly communicated to students and other departments across the campus, or within the Communication discipline nationally.

3 Assignment Alignment

Assignments are where the proverbial rubber meets the road. Program-level outcomes ideally structure curricula and suggest pedagogical approaches (though these are more individual to specific educators), but if the assignments students complete are not aligned to the outcomes, then students are not given opportunities to demonstrate the learning expected of them. Even worse, students are evaluated on learning that differs from what is communicated in the outcomes.

Because the LOCs are built around operational verbs, the kinds of assignment activities students can be given should be apparent. Alignment of assignments to outcomes entails matching the type of student activity to the outcome verb. Where students are asked to "explain," for example, a multiple-choice test would not be appropriate. Explanation requires a more substantial student behavior, such as an essay or short-answer question.

Assignment alignment also depends on how student demonstrations of learning are evaluated by faculty. Faculty members have different understandings of what constitutes proficiency, in part because they have different understandings of what satisfactory demonstration of learning means. Rubrics can be a useful tool for establishing a narrower range of expectations. As with the activities described earlier, development of rubrics works best when undertaken collectively.

A well-built rubric identifies the outcome being evaluated in student assignments and describes different degrees of success. Those descriptions are what make a rubric useful, as a simple list of evaluative criteria leaves a broad array of possible interpretations for "strong" or "weak." Rubrics need not be tailored to individual assignments. In fact, research suggests that analytic rubrics (rubrics that break out separate criteria) that are general enough for application to multiple assignments yield a higher degree of consensus across a curriculum. As an example, consider the rubric for Inquiry and Analysis on the opposite page.

Generation of rubrics written to evaluate student demonstrations of learning in Communication is most productive when undertaken as a consensus-building activity. Faculty can work in a variety of different ways, ranging from shared discussion of each performance level's description to the more organic process of Dynamic Criteria Mapping. Dynamic Criteria Mapping is a process through which faculty members candidly discuss what they do and do not value in actual student assignments so as to generate honest, collective definitions of what is expected of students in ways that do not oversimplify. More information about Dynamic Criteria Mapping is available in *Roadmap to Enhanced Student Learning: Implementing the DQP and Tuning*, pp 18-19; http://degreeprofile.org/press_four/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/RoadmapFinal.pdf.

CREATING AN ASSIGNMENT WORKSHOP

Assignment workshops serve as a good way to facilitate alignment of assignments with learning outcomes. While assignment alignment may happen at the level of an individual faculty member (and this is highly encouraged), the goal of an assignment workshop is to collectively brainstorm as a department or departmental subgroup regarding curriculum-based assignments for different courses that are designed or adapted to maximize engagement with specific LOCs or other learning outcomes that are deemed important by the department or program. The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment has conducted many assignment workshops and is compiling online Assignment Libraries for numerous disciplines. Visit www.learningoutcomesassessment.org for more information.

ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES VALID ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION (VALUE) RUBRIC FOR INQUIRY AND ANALYSIS

	CAPSTONE 4	MILESTONES 3	MILESTONES 2	BENCHMARK 1
TOPIC SELECTION	Identifies a creative, focused, and manageable topic that addresses potentially significant yet previously less-explored aspects of the topic.	Identifies a focused and manageable/doable topic that appropriately addresses relevant aspects of the topic.	Identifies a topic that while manageable/doable, is too narrowly focused and leaves out relevant aspects of the topic.	Identifies a topic that is far too general and wide-ranging as to be manageable and doable.
EXISTING KNOWLEDGE, RESEARCH, AND/OR VIEWS	Synthesizes in-depth information from relevant sources representing various points of view/approaches.	Presents in-depth information from relevant sources representing various points of view/approaches.	Presents information from relevant sources representing limited points of view/approaches.	Presents information from irrelevant sources representing limited points of view/approaches.
DESIGN PROCESS	All elements of the methodology or theoretical framework are skillfully developed. Appropriate methodology or theoretical frameworks may be synthesized from across disciplines or from relevant subdisciplines.	Critical elements of the methodology or theoretical framework are appropriately developed. However, subtler elements are ignored or unaccounted for.	Critical elements of the methodology or theoretical framework are missing, incorrectly developed, or unfocused.	Inquiry design demonstrates a misunderstanding of the methodology or theoretical framework.
ANALYSIS	Organizes and synthesizes evidence to reveal insightful patterns, differences, or similarities related to focus.	Organizes evidence to reveal important patterns, differences, or similarities related to focus.	Organizes evidence, but the organization is not effective in revealing important patterns, differences, or similarities.	Lists evidence, but it is not organized and/or is unrelated to focus.
CONCLUSIONS	States a conclusion that is a logical extrapolation from the inquiry findings.	States a conclusion focused solely on the inquiry findings. The conclusion arises specifically from and responds specifically to the inquiry findings.	States a general conclusion that, because it is so general, also applies beyond the scope of the inquiry findings.	States an ambiguous, illogical, or unsupportable conclusion from inquiry findings.
LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS	Insightfully discusses in detail relevant and supported limitations and implications.	Discusses relevant and supported limitations and implications.	Presents relevant and supported limitations and implications.	Presents limitations and implications, but they are possibly irrelevant and unsupported.

Drafting Program Descriptions

A program description, sometimes called a "degree specification," provides a concise description of a particular degree program. Your department might draft a program description for each degree it offers. For example, a graduate-degree granting institution might have specifications for both its B.A. and its M.A. degrees, with each document describing what distinguishes the program from the other and from other programs offered at other institutions. Program descriptions include:

- the department's understanding of the discipline's nature and purpose, with more specific statements about the purpose of a degree program;
- the characteristics of the department's particular program, including specific resources and areas of emphasis;
- the career pathways opened to students with that particular degree in the discipline;
- the department's approach to education in the discipline, indicating hallmarks of the program, such as service learning, practicums, or capstone experiences (among other noteworthy aspects of the program); and
- the program's learning outcomes.

Program descriptions can be useful for communicating with multiple audiences. Campus advisors can use the program description to direct students to your program, while career resource centers might make use of the program description to help students identify potential employment or internship possibilities. Students may refer to a program description for clear articulation of a major or minor. If program descriptions are revised for this purpose, they can serve as the basis for a student handbook. Other audiences might include institutions that receive students into graduate programs or through transfer, admissions offices, contingent faculty, library staff, and service learning offices.

Additional Stakeholder Outreach Activities

A fundamental value of the LOC project is that programs and their faculty can support student learning better by communicating more openly with stakeholders. The purpose of communicating with different stakeholders obviously depends on the stakeholders in question, and may range from informing educational partners about program emphases, expectations, and opportunities to surveying stakeholders about perceptions or experiences of the program. This kind of communication can open up possibilities for collaborative approaches to educating students. Program faculty might consider talking to:

- Contingent Faculty
- Career Center Staff
- Academic Advising Offices
- Writing Program Faculty
- Tutoring Centers
- Offices of Community Partnership
- Library Staff
- 2-Year to 4-Year Partners

Template for Creating a Program Description for Your Department

| INSTITUTION NAME & DEPARTMENT DEGREE LEVEL & NAME	
PURPOSE	A general statement on the degree track's overall purpose. This field can be used to provide a succinct statement of a department's philosophy as it relates to the specific degree level. The field might begin with a more general statement about the nature and purpose of the degree.
CHARACTERISTICS	The degree program as it is uniquely expressed at the specific institution. This field can highlight the distinctive features of the degree program, including disciplines and featured subject areas, general and specific focuses, etc.
CAREER PATHWAYS	A summary of the careers frequently undertaken by graduates, perhaps with reference to NCA's *Why Study Communication? Pathways to Your Future* document. This field can also note specific destinations of the degree program's graduates.
EDUCATION STYLE	The department's particular learning/teaching approaches, such as lectures, small seminars, and labs, and other distinctive aspects of the program's curricula and pedagogies.
PROGRAM COMPETENCIES & OUTCOMES	The program-level learning that was inspired by or mapped to the LOCs. This field might also include additional outcomes for specific departments.

Reviewing NCA's *Why Study Communication? Pathways to Your Future*

NCA's *Why Study Communication? Pathways to Your Future* reflects the work done in the LOC project. Program faculty may benefit from reviewing it. It may also, in conjunction with your program description, serve as the basis for productive conversations with Career Center staff.

To order copies of *Why Study Communication?*, visit the online NCA Bookstore.

WWW.NATCOM.ORG/BOOKSTORE
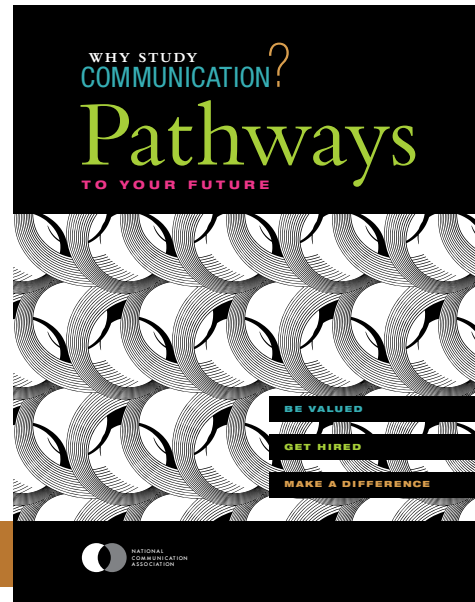
Surveying Students and Alumni

Surveying your students and alumni can provide valuable information about the use and perceived use of degrees in Communication.

Alumni are well-positioned to share experiences in the workplace and ways in which they use their learning in their careers. That information can help program faculty evaluate how curricula and pedagogies are preparing students for the breadth of careers that they may undertake. Note that this kind of discussion is not an attempt to vocationalize programs. Higher education—particularly regarding its degree programs that traditionally have not had clear career pathways—has often struggled to explain to students the ways in which program learning (outcomes) translates to the workplace. Surveying alumni can help faculty identify their graduates' applications of learning and, therefore, help them articulate the relevance of outcomes to careers.

Students often have their own understandings of what study in a discipline prepares them to do. At times those views grow out of their studies; other times they are assumed and not always accurate. Surveying students can provide the impetus for departmental reflection on this topic and generate conversations among faculty and with students.

NCA LOC Project Participants

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NCA's Learning Outcomes in Communication

A central assumption of these Learning Outcomes in Communication is that Communication constructs the social world and is relational, collaborative, strategic, symbolic, and adaptive. The LOCs are adaptable to different expectations for level of accomplishment at different degree levels.

LOC #1: DESCRIBE THE COMMUNICATION DISCIPLINE AND ITS CENTRAL QUESTIONS

- Explain the origins of the Communication discipline
- Summarize the broad nature of the Communication discipline
- Categorize the various career pathways for students of Communication
- Articulate the importance of communication expertise in career development and civic engagement
- Examine contemporary debates within the field
- Distinguish the Communication discipline from related areas of study
- Identify with intellectual specialization(s) in the Communication discipline

LOC #2: EMPLOY COMMUNICATION THEORIES, PERSPECTIVES, PRINCIPLES, AND CONCEPTS

- Explain Communication theories, perspectives, principles, and concepts
- Synthesize Communication theories, perspectives, principles, and concepts
- Apply Communication theories, perspectives, principles, and concepts
- Critique Communication theories, perspectives, principles, and concepts

LOC #3: ENGAGE IN COMMUNICATION INQUIRY

- Interpret Communication scholarship
- Evaluate Communication scholarship
- Apply Communication scholarship
- Formulate questions appropriate for Communication scholarship
- Engage in Communication scholarship using the research traditions of the discipline
- Differentiate between various approaches to the study of Communication
- Contribute to scholarly conversations appropriate to the purpose of inquiry

LOC #4: CREATE MESSAGES APPROPRIATE TO THE AUDIENCE, PURPOSE, AND CONTEXT

- Locate and use information relevant to the goals, audiences, purposes and contexts
- Select creative and appropriate modalities and technologies to accomplish communicative goals
- Adapt messages to the diverse needs of individuals, groups and contexts
- Present messages in multiple communication modalities and contexts
- Adjust messages while in the process of communicating
- Critically reflect on one's own messages after the communication event

LOC #5: CRITICALLY ANALYZE MESSAGES

- Identify meanings embedded in messages
- Articulate characteristics of mediated and non-mediated messages
- Recognize the influence of messages
- Engage in active listening
- Enact mindful responding to messages

LOC #6: DEMONSTRATE THE ABILITY TO ACCOMPLISH COMMUNICATIVE GOALS (SELF-EFFICACY)

- Identify contexts, situations and barriers that impede communication self-efficacy
- Perform verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors that illustrate self-efficacy
- Articulate personal beliefs about abilities to accomplish communication goals
- Evaluate personal communication strengths and weaknesses

LOC #7: APPLY ETHICAL COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

- Identify ethical perspectives
- Explain the relevance of various ethical perspectives
- Articulate the ethical dimensions of a communication situation
- Choose to communicate with ethical intention
- Propose solutions for (un)ethical communication
- Evaluate the ethical elements of a communication situation

LOC #8: UTILIZE COMMUNICATION TO EMBRACE DIFFERENCE

- Articulate the connection between communication and culture
- Recognize individual and cultural similarities and differences
- Appreciate individual and cultural similarities and differences
- Respect diverse perspectives and the ways they influence communication
- Articulate one's own cultural standpoint and how it affects communication and world view
- Demonstrate the ability to be culturally self-aware
- Adapt one's communication in diverse cultural contexts

LOC #9: INFLUENCE PUBLIC DISCOURSE

- Explain the importance of communication in civic life
- Identify the challenges facing communities and the role of communication in resolving those challenges
- Frame local, national and/or global issues from a Communication perspective
- Evaluate local, national and/or global issues from a Communication perspective
- Utilize communication to respond to issues at the local, national, and/or global level
- Advocate a course of action to address local, national and/or global issues from a Communication perspective
- Empower individuals to promote human rights, human dignity and human freedom

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