ASSURANCE OF INDIVIDUAL LEARNING IN EXPERIENTIAL STUDENT TEAM CONSULTING

Paul Belliveau
Director, MBA and Undergraduate Team Consulting Programs
Rutgers Business School — Newark and New Brunswick
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
180 University Avenue, Room 300b
Newark, NJ 07102-1897
973-353-1126
973-353-5888 (fax)
belliveau@business.rutgers.edu

Kerry L. Peluso
Associate Vice President for Research Administration
Emory University

Ronald G. Cook
Professor
Rider University
Abstract

This paper offers a model for responding to Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business’ (AACSB) requirement for assurance of learning for experiential learning courses. The model’s purpose is to assist faculty in analyzing and documenting individual student learning during the completion of team-based experiential learning courses, and to provide faculty with a tool to improve the quality of the experiential learning.

Introduction

On their website, AACSB states that “AACSB International accreditation assures quality and promotes excellence and continuous improvement in undergraduate and graduate education for business administration and accounting (2007, p.1).” The organization was founded in 1916 and began the accreditation function in 1919. The accreditation process is a voluntary, non-governmental review of institutions and their programs. To maintain accreditation, reviews are required on a five year cycle. The following is a synopsis taken from the AACSB website:

AACSB requires schools to use direct measurement methods to meet the standards of assurance of learning, as expressed through learning goals. Individual schools will determine their minimum expectation or standard as to what percentage of students must reach their determined level. While AACSB has not set any requirement in this area, a poor showing on student mastery of a learning goal would be a concern if not addressed in the development of curriculum to improve student skills in this area. Care needs to be given when group work is being used to demonstrate assurance of learning. Any class/project must be able to yield individual student performance data in order to be acceptable.

The AACSB standards have a twin emphasis on enhanced experiential learning and improved assurance of learning. AACSB has stated that schools should demonstrate what learning occurs for each learning goal that the school has established. This necessitates the establishment of defined learning goals and methods to measure the quality of learning which has occurred. This creates a challenge for those facilitating experiential learning courses. While classes such as student consulting programs seem to exemplify the goals of
experiential learning, the need to determine strategies to measure what learning has occurred in these programs creates a challenge. The pros and cons of experiential learning are well documented in Michael Ames (2006) paper “AACSB International’s Advocacy of Experiential Learning and Assurance of Learning – Boom or Bust for SBI Student Consulting?” We use his work as our point of departure for this paper. Our objective here is to devote to or create a usable tool that will allow assurance of learning from an individual perspective in an environment of “dynamic group activity with blurred individual responsibility (Ames, 2006, p. 3)”.

Specific standards for Assurance of Learning were included in the current standards issued by AACSB. These standards evaluate how well the school is accomplishing their educational goals. It evaluates areas including how successful the students are at achieving the learning appropriate to the programs in which they participate and whether the knowledge and skills gained are appropriate for the earned degrees. The process also assists schools and faculty in evaluating and improving courses and programs (AACSB, 2007).

Standards set a level of accomplishment which all students are expected to meet or exceed. Standards are not necessarily reflective of high quality learning as they may be the minimal requirement. Individual student’s work is judged against the standard rather than against the work of other students.

**Steps in Assurance of Learning:**

1. **Define Learning Goals and Objectives** - This first step is the development of a well defined list of learning goals which will demonstrate assurance of learning. Each program should have four to ten established learning goals. AACSB defines these goals as serving two purposes. The goals communicate the educational outcomes which students are working toward and they assist potential students in selecting programs which meet their personal goals. These goals vary by school as do the
development and assessment processes for these goals. These goals should be translated into clearly
defined objectives (AACSB, 2007).

2. **Align Curriculum with Goals** – The next step is determining where in the curriculum the learning
addressed in each objective takes place. What coursework or learning experiences will help students to
achieve these goals? Are they in specific courses or embedded throughout the curriculum or both
(AACSB, 2007).

3. **Identify Instruments and Measures** – This describes how one will know that the learning goals have
been met. Levels of acceptable performance must be defined for each objective. Two methodologies
are generally used, namely rubrics and primary trait analysis. To meet AACSB requirements,
assessment programs need to generate data that provide a basis for evaluating the program’s learning
objectives. While a carefully designed capstone project or similar requirement may accomplish this,
generally schools find multiple methods are needed to generate the necessary data. The school should
demonstrate that learning has occurred for each of the established learning goals (Bryan and Clegg,
2006). While AACSB does not mandate specific approaches to assurance of learning and encourages
schools to develop these themselves, they do stipulate that assessment programs should include direct
measures of learning and state that course grades are not program assessment measures. They also
provide some sample approaches (AACSB, 2007). These include:

- **Selection:** “The school may select students into a program on the basis of knowledge or skills
expected in graduates of a degree program (AACSB, 2007, p. 65).”

- **Course-embedded measurement:** “Required courses may include learning experiences
designed to provide particular knowledge or abilities that are specified in the school’s learning
goals (AACSB, 2007, p. 66).”
• **Demonstration through stand-alone testing or performance:** “Students may be required to demonstrate certain knowledge or skills as a requirement for graduation or at some other specific point of their degree programs (AACSB, 2007, p.66).”

4. **Analysis and Dissemination of Data** – The information gained from the assessment process must be analyzed and communicated to the faculty. Simply collecting the data, or even collecting data and completing a good analysis, is not enough. The information must be communicated to the faculty. Once this has been done, the faculty can begin working on improving the learning program (AACSB, 2007).

5. **Use Assessment Data for Continuous Improvement** – The final step is using the data gathered for future improvement of programs. If a significant number of students failed to demonstrate competence on a learning goal, the school must prepare a response that includes changes to the course or course design to address the deficiencies. As part of this process, schools should consider if the learning goals are appropriate, whether the objectives need modification and if the measures are providing adequate and appropriate data for evaluation. (Bryan and Clegg, 2006; Kolb and Kolb, 2005)

Experiential learning courses and programs face a somewhat unique challenge in providing assurance of learning in that many of the accepted tools for other traditional programs can not be easily adapted for use in experiential learning programs. Tools such as testing can fail to measure the true value acquired from an experiential learning process (Ames, 2006). In response to this challenge, we have developed a model that we believe provides assurance of learning.
Experiential Learning Courses Model for Assurance of Individual Learning

This model provides assurance of individual learning during and after an experiential learning course. Items one and two provide the broad parameters of our approach first, and then we provide a detailed breakdown of the components.

Summary of Requirements:

1. **Journal**: This journal is prepared independently by each student. It includes responses to pre designed surveys given at select times throughout the experiential learning project as well as self reflective entries. To help ensure that students put forth the needed effort to produce useful data for analysis, students should be informed that part of their final grade will be based upon the organization and full completion of their journal. This helps provide individual accountability in a group environment. Again, we build upon Ames’s (2006) recommendations.

2. **Analysis/Score by Faculty Instructor**: At the conclusion of the experiential learning course, students will be required to submit their completed journal to the instructor. Using a rubric designed to measure the learning that has occurred during the course, the instructor will analyze and score the journal content. This score is not used in the final grading for the course. Rather, it is recommended that the journal component of a final grade be based upon the organization, effort and full completion of the specified requirements for the journal. Here, the rubric score provides a measure that learning has occurred.

Proposed Learning Goals for Course/Program:

AACSB requires that learning goals are developed for the course/program. This initial step establishes the foundational areas for which assurance of learning must be provided. It is important to note that the
development of learning goals for any course or program should stem from the school’s overall learning goals. For our model, proposed learning goals for an experiential learning course are:

1. Each student must demonstrate an understanding of the steps necessary to develop and facilitate a consulting project plan.
2. Each student must demonstrate an understanding of the group collaborative process in decision making and project performance.
3. Each student can recognize and conceptualize a complex issue into a clearly written summary.

The Purpose of Journal:
This will be the tool used to determine if learning has occurred. Evaluation of responses to the same/similar questions asked at different points will provide data on learning progression. See Appendix A for example of a Journal Requirements Outline to be provided to students. The journal is proposed to include the following:

1. **Standard Questionnaire** – Questions are designed to measure student’s level of knowledge on relevant areas during various, pre-determined stages of the project. Relevant areas are derived from learning goals. During the first class meeting, the theory of the journal will be explained to the students. It is important to explain that the grade for the journal will be based upon organization and effort to provide complete answers. The correctness of responses will not be part of the student’s grade. This will allow students to respond honestly based upon the facts they have at that time. We recommended that the initial questionnaire, if possible, be administered in a classroom environment very early in the program. This will prevent students from doing further research to provide the “correct” answers. The goal of this initial survey is to establish a measure of the knowledge the student brings into the program. If an in-person classroom survey is not possible or feasible, this could be done in an online test environment.
providing limited time for response and stating that outside resources should not be utilized, while emphasizing that the grade is not based upon accuracy of content. The same questionnaire should be given out 1-3 additional times during the project and at the end of the project. The questionnaire should provide validation that it was not changed after its original completion. Further, faculty review of these submissions can also provide feedback for faculty on areas which may require further communication or development thus offering additional insight for learning experience improvements. Analysis of these questionnaires will be used at subsequent reviews to measure that learning which has occurred. See Appendix B for sample Standard Questionnaire.

2. Other Entries – Throughout the program, the faculty instructor may add additional questionnaires or writing assignments as they feel needed or beneficial.

Analysis/Score by Faculty Instructor:

As determined by the school/instructor, the journal can be submitted intermittently throughout the project or only at the end of the project. We suggest three submissions. This will provide the faculty with two progress and one final measure of learning. It will allow the faculty member to provide students with further guidance, information or requirements for journal entries during the remaining time to help achieve the learning goals. Alternatively, an online journal may be utilized.

We evaluated the journal responses to open ended questions posed to a student consulting team. Three questionnaires were used and were given at three times during the consulting engagement: beginning of the project, at the mid-point, and at the end.
The first questionnaire had 4 open-ended questions which measured the level of knowledge the students had about the consulting process, prior to beginning the consulting assignment. These questions were repeated in questionnaires 2 and 3, plus additional questions were asked in these two questionnaires that would reflect issues that may have occurred during the consulting assignment (see Appendix A).

We then compared the three questionnaires to see if students had increased their understanding of the consulting process, using the rubric. We will share the responses to one of these questions from one student as an example of the knowledge gained during the consulting process. The question was: “Describe the challenges you anticipate (or have encountered) in working as part of a management group addressing the needs of the client.”

Student response on questionnaire 1: “Too many people putting too much input into needs and problems. I have been a part of many groups where meeting after meeting is called to discuss an issue and nothing gets resolved.” In this example, the student’s focus in on group dynamics of past meetings and how past experiences have impacted him.

Student response on questionnaire 2 (midway in the project): “I see two challenges. The first is that none of us are in the insurance industry whereas our client is. They may understand their needs better than we do which could cause problems if what we feel is best for the firm differs from their ideas. Management would like to increase market share but we know that their workflow and employee morale is in terrible shape.”

The student’s focus has shifted to the client’s needs and is not based on issues relating to the group.
Student response on questionnaire 3 (at conclusion of project): “The biggest challenge was for us to inform client how horrible their structure is. Fortunately, Beth had no problem putting it in our report. It was a learning experience for me to be able to tell a firm bad news – especially relating to stuff that the company controls.”

The student thinking has matured to consider project success. He faces a dilemma in that the results are not favorable to the client and is learning how to deliver bad news. He has learned to rely on other group members and views their strengths as an asset to the solution, not simply as a waste of time, as he previously felt.

A rubric should be used by the faculty member for the particular course or program in scoring the learning. To add an additional level of objectivity, this analysis/scoring could be done by an individual unconnected to the course such as another faculty member. The rubric must be completed with the learning goals clearly in mind. Appendix C provides a suggested rubric based upon the previously provided learning goals. An electronic tool for entering rubric data is highly recommended. This can be developed in Microsoft Excel or similar program to allow faculty to enter scores while totals for each individual and overall statistics/reports for the class are automatically calculated. The development of a tool such as this will save significant time and can provide documentation of the process undertaken. In addition, it can provide the data needed for evaluation of program content and consideration of possible program improvements.

The rubric example (Appendix C) requires analysis and score of four variables for each learning goal. Data used for scoring will be obtained from journal entries including those submitted on behalf of the group (see Section 3 requirements on Appendix A). It is important to note that scores are to be given based upon
individual performance and improvement which will include consideration of individual’s impact on group’s performance. Each variable will receive a score of 1-4. A score of “1” would reflect no ability or demonstration of understanding or progress in this area.

The summary reflects a requirement of 36 overall points (with a minimum of 10 in any learning goal) as the minimum level required for successful attainment of learning goals. While the overall requirement requires a score that reflects an average at the level of “Accomplished”, scoring at the “Accomplished” level is not required for each individual area. The rationale is that exemplary success in some variables with a developing success in other areas would document reasonable overall assurance of learning for learning goals. A score of 36 would not be required until the end of the program. Scores for the interim review(s) would be anticipated to be in the “developing” range. Faculty should pay particular attention to areas which are not showing desired progress at interim reviews. Faculty should provide further input or tools to student(s) to ensure students meet the final score requirement of 36 at the end of the program.

Utilizing Data for Future Program Development:

Faculty should review scores as each program is completed. Any learning goal with an overall student average of under 12 would indicate a need for program improvement. Faculty should review the program to determine steps necessary to improve its content to a level where students will be able to master the variables.

Conclusion

The AACSB has issued Assurance of Learning Standards in an effort to improve the quality of business education and to hold educators responsible for meeting specified learning goals. The implementation of these standards also provides an additional vehicle for faculty to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs and
identify areas in need of improvement. While Assurance of Learning Standards appear to create an additional challenge for experiential learning courses and programs (Ames, 2006), methods can be developed to meet these requirements and the intended goals of these standards. We argue that the effort must be undertaken less we suffer the risk that experiential learning courses will be dropped from the curriculum because measurement is perceived to be too difficult. The model outlined above is one method that would allow faculty to evaluate the learning that has occurred in these courses while improving the quality of the learning experience for the students.
Appendix A

Journal Requirements

Students are required to create and maintain a journal during the performance of this project. While online submission may be required for select assignments throughout the semester, a complete printed version of the journal will be required at the completion of the project. Exact dates provided in class calendar.

Journals will be graded based upon organization of journal and effort to provide complete responses/entries based upon level of knowledge at point of completion. The accuracy of responses will not be graded.

**Journal requirements are as follows:** (Sections 1 & 2 must be submitted by each student. One copy of Section 3 is required per group.)

*Submitted individually by student:*

**Section 1:** Standard Questionnaires – Completion of these questionnaires will be required throughout the program per the class schedule. This section should include copies of all questionnaires completed and submitted. These questionnaires are intended to be completed with 30 minutes or less without the use of other
materials or resources. While some of the questions remain the same for each questionnaire, variation in the responses is anticipated as the student’s experience grows and more information becomes available during the consulting assignment.

**Section 2:** Other Entries – Throughout the project, other questionnaires or written assignments may be requested by Professor. This section should include copies of these assignments as originally submitted.

Submitted by group:

**Section 3:** Project Materials – Copies of the following are required:

1. First draft of the Letter of Engagement
2. The final Letter of Engagement
3. The initial presentation to clients on overview of project
4. The final presentation to clients on results of project
5. The final report to clients
6. Any other deliverables provided to clients
Appendix B

Standard Questionnaire

Requirements: *(unless noted responses should be no more than 1-3 paragraphs)*

First Submission: Responses to Section A only (limited to 30 minutes)

Interim Submissions: Responses to Sections A and B

Final Submission: Responses to Sections A, B and C

**Section A:**

1. Describe the purpose of a Letter of Engagement. Based upon your current knowledge, what do you believe it should include? Discuss what you see to be the main challenges in the development of a Letter of Engagement.

2. What do you see as the main issues to be addressed in designing the scope of a project and a project plan. What do you feel will create the largest challenges in staying within this scope?

3. Describe the challenges you anticipate (or have encountered) in working as part of a team consulting group that is addressing the needs of a client.

4. Describe the challenges you anticipate (or have encountered) in communicating and working with the assigned client. (If this is not the first questionnaire, please describe one communication issue which
has occurred and what your group has done to address it. Also, describe how you feel you individually contributed to this resolution.)
Section B:

1. Explain the challenge (as you see it at this time) that your client has requested your group’s assistance with.
2. At this point, what do you think your group could have outlined better in the Letter of Engagement?
3. What improvements do you believe your group could have made in the initial communications with the client?
4. What is the largest challenge your group has experienced and how was it addressed or is being addressed?
5. To date, what do you think is the most important thing you have learned during the performance of this project?

Section C:

1. Provide a summary of one challenge your client faced and how it was addressed by your group. Please include details on how you feel your group dynamics contributed to (or diminished) the success of your project.
2. What are the three most valuable things you learned during the completion of this assignment?
3. How might this learning experience be relevant to your future professional career?
4. How do you believe your learning experience in this program could have been improved?
Appendix C

Rubric

For use in evaluation of student journals prepared.

Requirements: (unless noted responses should be no more than 1-3 paragraphs)

Student Journals should be scored in each of the following categories. Total should be recorded for each subcategory.

Learning Goals:

1. Each student must demonstrate an understanding of the steps necessary to develop and facilitate a project plan.

2. Each student must demonstrate an understanding of the group collaborative process in decision making and project performance.

3. Each student can recognize and conceptualize a complex issue into a clearly written summary.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Goal:</th>
<th>Concept:</th>
<th>Beginning</th>
<th>Developing</th>
<th>Accomplished</th>
<th>Exemplary</th>
<th>Score:</th>
<th>Total:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Understands process of developing Letter of Engagement.</td>
<td>Demonstrates minimal knowledge.</td>
<td>Demonstrates awareness of need for LOE and steps necessary to prepare.</td>
<td>Understands the process necessary to develop a LOE</td>
<td>Demonstrates extensive insight on process. Thoroughly understands consequences of poorly developed LOE.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Understands process of developing project plan.</td>
<td>Demonstrates minimal knowledge.</td>
<td>Demonstrates expanding understanding.</td>
<td>Understands the process necessary to develop a project plan.</td>
<td>Identifies high level of knowledge on effective project development.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Understands process of developing and maintaining the scope for project.</td>
<td>Demonstrates minimal knowledge.</td>
<td>Demonstrates expanding understanding.</td>
<td>Demonstrates a thorough understanding on managing the scope of a project.</td>
<td>Is able to provide extensive insight on managing scope and has developed unique methods to do so.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Journal entries document an expanding understanding of project management.</td>
<td>Demonstrates minimal increased knowledge from initial entry.</td>
<td>Demonstrates some expanding understanding.</td>
<td>Clearly demonstrates an expanded level of understanding in this area.</td>
<td>Demonstrates a very high expansion of knowledge since initial entry.</td>
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<td>Entry Score 1</td>
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<td><strong>Understands steps necessary for developing and maintaining successful group interactions.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Demonstrates minimal knowledge.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Demonstrates expanding understanding of group dynamics.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Entries demonstrate a good understanding of group dynamics and how to be an effective member of a team.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Entries demonstrate an ability to identify potential problems and lead group to successful resolution of outstanding issues.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Journal entries document the attitude of an effective team player.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Demonstrates limited ability to interact as part of a group.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Entries reflect some participation in group including taking responsibility for assignments.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Entries reflect active participation in group, volunteering for assignments, meeting deadlines, etc.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Entries reflect strong participation and successfully assuming a role in some form of leadership position.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Journal entries reflect attitude of shared responsibility for team’s results.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Demonstrates limited ability to see oneself as responsible for group’s success.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Entries reflect limited understanding of need for commitment to the group and group’s deadlines.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Entries reflect a strong commitment to the group’s success.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Entries reflect an expanded organizational role in group’s success.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Journal entries document an expanding understanding of the group collaborative process.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Demonstrates minimal increased knowledge from initial entry.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Demonstrates some expanding understanding.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Clearly demonstrates an expanded level of understanding in this area.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Demonstrates a very high expansion of knowledge since initial entry.</strong></td>
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<td>Score</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Entries do not fully cover many required topics.</td>
<td>Entries fully cover most required topics.</td>
<td>Entries fully cover the required topics.</td>
<td>Entries fully cover all required topics, are well organized and include additional detail and insight.</td>
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<td>Journal includes entries fully covering and detailing all required topics.</td>
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<td>Journal entries demonstrate an ability to effectively and concisely summarize the relevant, complex issues.</td>
<td>Entries lack organization and are difficult to understand.</td>
<td>Entries reflect some organization and effective summarization.</td>
<td>Entries include an effective and concise description of relevant and complex issues.</td>
<td>Entries and thoughts are extremely well organized demonstrating a very effective ability to identify and summarize all issues.</td>
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<td>Journal entries demonstrate an ability to recognize issues which may impact a project’s success.</td>
<td>Entries reflect limited ability to identify relevant issues.</td>
<td>Entries reflect an expanding ability to recognize relevant issues.</td>
<td>Entries reflect an ability to recognize issues which will impact a project’s success.</td>
<td>Entries reflect an ability to recognize issues as well as an ability to develop well though out plans to address these issues.</td>
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<td>Journal entries demonstrate an increased ability to identify and conceptualize the issues impacting the project performance.</td>
<td>Demonstrates minimal increased knowledge from initial entry.</td>
<td>Demonstrates some expanding understanding.</td>
<td>Clearly demonstrates an expanded level of understanding in this area.</td>
<td>Demonstrates a very high expansion of knowledge since initial entry.</td>
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### Summary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Goal 1 Score:</th>
<th>___</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning Goal 2 Score:</td>
<td>___</td>
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<td>Learning Goal 3 Score:</td>
<td>___</td>
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</table>

| Total Score:           | ___ |
| **Met minimum level:** | Yes _____ No _____ |

(Requires total score of 36 with no individual learning goal falling below 10)
References


