INTRODUCTION

For the 2011/2012 school year, the PCC Philosophy Department was tasked with assessing its ability to promote student learning as it pertains to the fulfillment of the College’s Core Outcomes for Critical Thinking and Problem Solving and Community and Environmental Responsibility.

**Critical Thinking and Problem Solving:** Identify and investigate problems, evaluate information and its sources, and use appropriate methods of reasoning to develop creative and practical solutions to personal, professional and community issues.

**Community and Environmental Responsibility:** Apply scientific, cultural and political perspectives to natural and social systems and use an understanding of social change and social action to address the consequences of local and global human activity.

Assessment Strategy for Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

For assessing the outcome of Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, the Philosophy SAC decided to distribute a journal article for students to read and have them write a brief response that tested them on their critical thinking and problem solving abilities. This was done in two separate classes of Philosophy 195: Critical Thinking, Science and the Occult. The articles and questions were distributed and completed once at the beginning of the term and again at the end of the term. By comparing their responses at the beginning of the term to their responses at the end of the term, it was hypothesized that student learning might be measured by observing improvements in their responses as indicated by shifts in identifying arguments, evaluating information, and reasoned support for conclusions.

Assessment Evaluation and Discussion

Instructor Michael Warwick then read the responses to the journal articles and had the following observations about students ability to use critical thinking and problem solving skills after taking the PHL 195 course: “I thought certain students demonstrated an increasing awareness of how to assess the validity of the test being described in the article. Words such as "subjective" vs "objective" began to appear and students seemed to show an awareness of how such objectivity is achieved through a comparison with a control group, etc. That was the evidence I saw that suggested that our instruction had modified the pre-existing knowledge of the student over the course of the class.”
The Philosophy SAC then reviewed Mike’s findings in the Spring 2012 Inservice meeting and there was a spirited debate about the approach used to assess critical thinking and problem solving. Here are some positions taken by some Philosophy SAC members on this issue:

Shirlee questioned the methodology of these assessment efforts and made note of their failure to conform to best practices regarding anonymity and criteria for assessment. At the heart of the disagreement about the utility of these efforts, there is a valid question about whether or not philosophy can even be assessed in a fashion that will adequately meet accrediting standards without the department falling into a situation where, as Mike has said, “the tail is wagging the dog”. Given the nature of philosophy, many of its benefits do not become fully manifest or understood until long after the course is complete. Alexa suggested we consider ways to integrate broader examples into our assessment strategies. John shared a recent story from a biomedical ethics conference where he ran into a former student who was working with Kaiser as an ethics officer and she credited her time with John as the main reason she got the job. While such cases work well as anecdotes and will perhaps enrich our program review, it remains a near impossible task to determine the specific success philosophy has had in contributing to such situations. Mike Warwick wrote after further reflection: “We need to more fully integrate these tests with the curriculum. The problem is that we do not have a uniform curriculum, nor do we desire one. So there's a difficulty here. Maybe we can decide just what basic concepts need to be covered in any such 195 course and leave it open to the individual instructor how that material/ideas, etc., are presented in class. This would take some hammering out. But it was those basic concepts that I wanted to see appear in the 2nd response and that was not evident in the students' initial responses. Ideas such as sampling, controls, blinding, the problem of induction (vs. induction) and the distinction between science and pseudo-science, etc. Without that common ground I cannot see us producing satisfactory criteria for judging the success of our instruction except on a class by class basis (which I presume is unacceptable).”

Assessment Strategy for Community and Environmental Responsibility

*Community and Environmental Responsibility* was assessed in sections of Philosophy 206: Introduction to Environmental Ethics and Philosophy 208: Political Philosophy. The method of assessment consisted in a set of questions distributed to and then answered by students on the first day of class and then the students answered the same questions close to the last day of the term. The questions were as follows:

*How would you define your community? What is your place in your community and*
Assessment Evaluation and Discussion

Instructors Brandi Parisi and John Farnum then read the responses from the beginning of the term and the end of the term. They both gave a report to the Philosophy SAC at the 2012 Spring Inservice meeting. Brandi felt the assessment was “artificial”. However, she was impressed with the improvements many students had made in their comprehension of community. More students came back in their post-test with more questions than answers and she estimates that about 60% showed some degree of improvement. John reflected these findings and said that he was “pleased” about the improvement of about 60%-70% of the students. He argued that their responses demonstrated a greater sense of commitment and seriousness about their sense of responsibility. For example, he said that some students originally thought that “community” only referred to the human world and they defined community as their connections to others as citizens of a city, state or nation. Whereas, on the post-test, students were more likely to cite other living things (such as, plants, animals, and even ecosystems) as constituting part of their community. Brandi and John both suggested that the post-test not be given on the last day of class as it affected the quality of responses since students were eager to leave. Shirlee mentioned that it would be more beneficial to embed the assessment into a graded assignment. Most members agreed with this concept.

CONCLUSIONS

The philosophy SAC views these attempts at assessment as useful, yet inevitably flawed, tools in encouraging conversations about teaching. There are many disagreements in the SAC about the best way to assess student learning, but the SAC sees this as a strength and disagreements can be seen as a healthy tension that is allowing members to actively reflect on these topics and better refine their efforts in the classroom. One point of agreement, ironically, is that there will never be an “ideal” mode of assessment or a “perfect” rubric to calibrate shared perspectives on student achievement. Despite our differences over the role of assessment, the process itself has proven to be a positive one that has strengthened our collective efforts. More discussion and refinement is needed in our assessment process, but overall there is agreement that talking about assessment is helping us to generally identify ways that we can have productive dialogues on this subject. The more challenging issue for the Philosophy SAC is to come up with an assessment approach that is “simple and elegant” so we get good data and
will lead to productive conversations which move our SAC forward towards an effective assessment of student learning.