

Remarks on SLOs to the MPC Board of Trustees by David Clemens, 11/25/2008

We must all thank Fred for the work he put into his presentation but I challenge his conclusion—I contend that whether SLOs assessment is a beneficial advance in educational practice or a deceptive folly, whether it is a miraculous gift or a Trojan Horse bristling with danger, is not a matter of perspective.

I could expand on several of the objections to SLOs that have been briefly noted but I will stick to one. My purpose is simply to dispel the one fatal misconception fostered by SLO advocates. I say “fatal” because that one misconception is the excuse for SLOs in the first place and their purported justification.

First, my credentials: I first published about SLOs in 2003, an article titled “The Five Myths of `Assessment.” I consulted with the California Federation of Teachers lawyer crafting the letter to ACCJC about its usurpation of bargaining rights. Last spring, for its statewide conference, the California Teachers Association asked me to present a panel and paper which I called “The Lies About SLOs.” CTA asked me to present again this fall. A subsequent article was published titled “Exposing the Big Lies About SLOs.” “Myths,” “Lies,” “Big Lies”—you detect a theme. And while I am tempted here today to describe SLOs as a fraud, I will yield to the collegiality of the moment and employ the term “misconception.”

Let us get, as my father liked to say, to the meat of the coconut. ACCJC’s SLO doubletalk repeatedly invokes the term “student learning.” Let me state, without reservation or exception, that SLOs have nothing whatever to do with student learning.

SLOs are a way to make teachers and schools accountable rather than students; SLOs are about laying a ground work for future standardization and so-called “alignment;” SLOs are about “high stakes testing” with punishments and penalties for teachers and schools; and SLOs are about life and death struggles among agencies external to MPC where we are caught in the SLO crossfire. SLOs also are about trying to measure the un-measurable and about trying to observe the invisible. But SLOs are not about learning.

I make that claim because SLOs actually ignore students and HOW they learn. SLOs assume that student learning is the result of teachers and lessons. Anyone who teaches knows that the most important factor in a student’s educational performance is: the student. The greatest effects on learning are the individual student’s knowledge of the subject, self motivation, language proficiency, aptitude, maturity, disposition, family support, social skills, talent, physical and mental health, cultural background, religious beliefs, political persuasion,

commitment, level of cognitive growth, age, and work ethic. Student learning outcomes take no notice of any of these factors.

It's not surprising, then, that although SLO doubletalk demands a "culture of evidence," it exempts itself. It **has to** because there exists no objective evidence anywhere that SLOs have had any positive impact on anyone's learning. That is, SLO theory is a house of cards built on faulty assumptions.

Now, there is evidence that SLOs lead to "dumbed down" course objectives and "teaching to the test" so that students "succeed" (but that pedagogical misfeasance is temporary because it only encourages and justifies external intervention and loss of local control). I speculate that our worthy administrators know this, that they don't like SLOs any more than the rest of us, and that they can read the handwriting on the wall, but their hands are tied by the ACCJC threat. I would further argue that no more than a handful of teachers at MPC see even marginal value in SLOs. No one wanted to be SLO Coordinator. Faculty cooperation has been coerced by repeating the threat of loss of accreditation, something none of us wants, and so faculty also feel that their hands are tied. As a responsible Board, your hands are tied even though precedent is that SLOs lead on to greater bureaucracies with Coordinators, Deans of Assessment (15,000 hits on Google), offices of assessment, spread sheet teacher evaluations, and rubrics which try to reduce human beings to decimals.

Student learning? In truth, SLOs are now and have always been only about control, about managing teachers, not educating students. They install a mechanical, vocational assessment model in which students are reduced to undifferentiated raw material and the college becomes a stamping mill. You probably remember the famous book and film Clockwork Orange but you may not remember the meaning of the title. A "clockwork orange" is an abomination, a horrible mistake that happens when we treat the organic and living as if it were the inorganic and mechanical. Anthony Burgess, the book's author, said "this title would be appropriate for a story about the application of Pavlovian, or mechanical, laws to an organism which, like a fruit, was capable of colour and sweetness." SLOs, indeed, are the stepchild of Pavlov and Skinner, of conditioning and behaviorism, a grim and ironic fate for MPC which for so many years has been the host and the haven of humane values.

But let me conclude by saying that although our hands are tied, our tongues are not. To quote Primo Levi, "we still possess one power, and we must defend it with all our strength for it is the last—the power to refuse our consent." In that spirit, the persistent, vocal faculty resistance to SLOs, to this . . . clockwork orange . . . should be celebrated and served up to our accreditation mandarins as evidence of MPC's intellectual vitality and our respect for the uniqueness . . . and dignity . . . of those individuals whom we teach and serve.

Thank you.