

Comparative Literature Undergraduate Major Assessment, 2008-09
DUE Assessment Grant, Phase 2
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The goal of our project was to start a discussion among the faculty about assessing the undergraduate major in Comparative Literature. Through multiple activities--syllabus review, consultation with an outside expert, and group analysis of student writing--we decided upon three aims: (1) to inform ourselves about the field of assessment as it applies to humanities generally and Comparative Literature specifically, (2) to formulate learning outcomes based on our distinctive view of the field, and (3) to establish baseline information about student writing at three levels of the curriculum.

Phase One:

For the first stage of our project, we hired a graduate student to review all existing syllabi for courses at three levels of instruction in the major: introductory, upper-division elective, and senior capstone. Although we had agreed on common orientations for the three introductory courses, the language we used in the past was not that of learning outcomes but more oriented toward course content. Reviewing the syllabi enabled the core project group to extract implicit or explicit learning outcomes at each level of instruction in the major. The grad student also combed the internet for assessment projects in other Comparative Literature programs across the nation. She found some programs with assessment materials online, but it was notable to us that none of the programs fully engaged in assessment was located in a research-one university.

These are the draft Student Learning Outcomes we formulated from the syllabus review:

- 1: Students will be able to read critically literary and cultural texts in a range of genres and media (novels, poetry, drama, film, monuments, political discourse, popular culture, audio, etc.): reading critically entails the ability to identify generic or formal structures, philosophical investments, stylistic texture, rhetorical gestures, and the features of literary periods. The attitude associated with this objective is an appreciation for the complexities of cultural work across a wide range of styles and forms.
- 2: Students will demonstrate knowledge of historical, linguistic, and cultural contexts of texts as they are produced and received across national boundaries and in response to the dynamics of global movements and crises creating dynamic intersections of power, peoples, and aesthetic practices. An attitude cultivated in connection with this objective is a stance of intellectual openness and an ability to value cultural difference that not only overcomes essentialization and other forms of cultural condescension but moves beyond the celebration of difference for its own sake to a practice of critical awareness of the complexities of global literacy and citizenship in the 21st century.
- 3: Students will be able to use critical terminology and interpretive methods drawn from specific 20th- and 21st-century comparative and critical theories from multiple disciplines, including

cultural studies, philosophy, anthropology, visual studies, and rhetoric. Ideally, students will move from application to creative appropriation and critique of critical models.

4: Students will be able to construct interpretive arguments orally and in writing with increasing confidence and complexity over the course of the major. Ultimately, students will produce major, multi-stage critical essays characterized by originality and a personal investment in disciplinary dialogues.

5: Students will experience an extended encounter with at least one language other than English, including for most students a study-abroad experience. They will show be able to work with literary texts in another language and understand translation as a creative process.

Phase Two: Consultant

We invited an assessment consultant with a background in humanities to give us a historical perspective on the assessment “movement” and assist us in formulating the project in humanistic terms. Our consultant, Barbara Wright (Ph.D. in German, UC Berkeley; WASC Senior Staff) met with faculty in humanities and DUE assessment staff on May 1, 2009.

Wright began by addressing reservations and misconceptions about assessment in American History Association president Gabrielle M. Spiegel’s essay, “A Triple ‘A’ Threat: Accountability, Assessment, Accreditation.” Here are some of the points made during the presentation:

--regional accreditors (e.g., WASC) do not dictate outcomes or ways of measuring them; the accreditor only asks that you have identified them for yourself

--embedded assessment makes visible what you already do; an organized process for getting together as a group and discussing how students are progressing: what are they doing well, what is perhaps being “over-taught”

--assessment differs from regular assignments and grading: it’s collective, based on an agreed-upon goal, there is a built-in expectation that the issues identified that will be attended to

--assessment is close to the ground: uncumbersome, unintrusive attempts to discover whether students are actually learning what we have decided upon

--what is portable in a piece of writing? how does one make oneself portable? program level assessment enables you to look at what students use across classes

--how do we assess curiosity, a tolerance for uncertainty at the program level? ask students to generate questions rather than ask them; determine what is a good question

--assessment does not have the technology right now to demonstrate and measure the most ambitious goals for our students; we do not want to lower our goals to the level of existing assessment technology.

Phase Three: Reading student writing

On 8 May 2008, our faculty and eight graduate students read student writing from three levels and met to discuss the writing in relation to the draft Student Learning Outcomes. The purpose of the event was to examine the fit between the writing we are assigning and the outcomes we seek.

We read approximately 150-200 pages of student writing and prepared written descriptions of each essay. We discussed the writing at three levels in small groups and then held a general discussion. The process was very illuminating. Through it, we generated a list of questions about the kinds of assignments we make, the need for more discussion about the scope of our proposed outcomes in relation to students' abilities, and the need to discuss our expectations for forms of reading and writing we want to cultivate in our majors.

Summary of suggestions and questions for discussion:

I. Intro courses (60A, B, and C):

- In 60A the discussions about cultural/historical difference (SLO 2) are good, but students don't choose to write about those topics. How do we address that? Could research address that problem?
- The most successful papers do close reading. We need to specify methods of reading in SLO 1, including the comparative reading of translations.
- We need to decide for 60B what we want students to do with theory: use? apply? how many different models? Is it ok for them to get it wrong? Should the course focus on three theoretical approaches that they could understand?
- Concerning SLO 4, we need to clarify that it's ok not to require full-on argument in the intro. courses but rather isolate practices through small assignments. On occasion, we could ask students to write as students rather than in the disciplinary stance of literary critic.

II. Electives (100-level courses)

- Papers from these two upper-division elective classes (120, Modernism; 150, Ancient Greek Novel) show that SLOs 2 and 3 are emphasized selectively in the two classes. We will discuss identifying the electives in terms of the outcomes they emphasize and encouraging students to take courses with a range of emphases (e.g., theory and history/culture). Can we make language difference more visible in courses in translation?
- In terms of writing, there was a wide range of approaches to "thesis/argument." In some cases, students wrote quite rigidly in defense of a seamless argument (the "death grip" on the thesis approach). Others took a more creative approach, happily untethered to conventions of writing in the discipline. Some arguments were well-supported but lacked complexity. Should we

include the possibility of students working outside the parameters/modes of critical academic discourse? Perhaps we could encourage a variety of rhetorical stances and approaches to writing criticism and theory. Should we include something about the complexity we expect in the formulation of arguments? We noted that some writers in these courses are still struggling for control of standard academic English.

III. Capstone (190W)

- In this course, shorter papers gave students different ways of encountering theory, and longer papers were highly individualized. We found historical background missing from some papers and found some students a bit over-whelmed by theory.
- How do we assess creative papers? Are disciplinary SLOs too ambitious for a course including non-majors? Should we reconsider this policy? Can we include the possibility of collaboration in the capstone?

Future plans:

Faculty who regularly teach courses in each of the three levels will meet in small groups to coordinate syllabi and incorporate the appropriate SLOs. We will organize a second annual writing event to solidify our criteria for evaluation and begin to collect longitudinal results. We will post the revised SLOs to our website and include them in other communications to students.