

Unit Plan for Assessing and Improving Student Learning in Degree Programs

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Introduction—

The Department of English trains its students in a variety of language-based skills, including:

- the ability to read and comprehend the literal and figurative meanings of texts
- the ability to explore the relationship between language and meaning, representation and reality
- the ability to produce an interpretation
- the ability to invent new ideas and express them in writing
- the ability to solve problems indirectly by thinking metaphorically
- the ability to envision the world in a new way through figurative language
- the ability to understand literary traditions and genres
- the ability to understand culture as a system of shared meanings
- the ability to “read” contemporary culture through the practice of cultural literacy
- the ability to understand and appreciate a shared cultural past
- the ability to understand and appreciate cultural differences across time and genre as well as within contemporary interpersonal groupings
- the ability to engage in inquiry and dialogue with a scholarly community
- the ability to understand the theories and methods of literary interpretation
- the ability to appreciate the aesthetic experience
- the ability to think critically
- the ability to write persuasively
- the ability to write creatively

Although this list is fairly comprehensive, it is not exhaustive. Indeed, to speak of “skills” suggests that training in English language and literature is a vocational study, offering students a set of techniques that they can use to enhance their value within the commercial realm upon graduation. To be sure, the English major offers students marketable skills that have myriad uses (e.g., in education, publishing, law, business, etc.). But it also offers students “life skills” which help them engage in and reflect upon their experiences as human beings. After all, such experiences are almost always understood through narrative—whether a story told to oneself or to others—complete with characters, conflicts and resolutions. And, as Sigmund Freud famously observed, the *way* such stories are told—the language or figuration that is used—is often more important than the story itself. Narrative, in other words, fulfills an epistemological function, revealing not just what we think but how we think it. The basis of our knowledge is language.

This is something the best science writers know; describing the sequence of the human genome, for example, science writers have recently invoked vivid metaphors such as chapters in a book or keys on a piano to explain the inter-relationships among the

constitutive elements of the DNA structure. Other scientists call upon a critical understanding of language and literary form to analyze the linguistic assumptions that lie at the base of standard models of knowledge, introducing new metaphors of understanding and tracing new narrative arcs in their data to effect important paradigm shifts. Language, in other words, does not simply render thought as communication; it structures the very ideas that are communicated. A study of language and literature is thus essential to all academic disciplines and to all branches of knowledge.

Because this critical understanding of language and literature is an essential life skill, with implications well beyond the English classroom, the successful acquisition of such “skills” is more difficult to measure. The assessment instruments proposed here attempt to measure only those skills that lend themselves to the sort of quantitative approach toward collecting data implicit in this mandate.

I. Past Assessment Results—

A. Literature major

Since 2003, the English Department has been conducting a survey among its graduating seniors to determine their satisfaction in the major. The survey is comprised of four sections: 1) general questions about the major as a whole, the classroom environment, and the quality of faculty and advisors, 2) focused questions about the skills developed by the major, 3) comparative questions about English coursework in relation to courses outside the major, and 4) open-ended questions, in which students may make narrative comments and suggestions. In 2006, three surveys were created, one specific to the Literature major, one specific to Rhetoric, and one specific to the Professional Writing option (now defunct). In general, the data indicate that our majors are quite happy with their chosen field of study. Room for improvement has been—and will continue to be—noted, such as a preference for smaller classes, as opposed to the large lecture surveys introduced in 2003, at the behest of the College of LAS. With 6 years of data available, we were able to run a longitudinal analysis of results this year. No significant trends appeared, with two exceptions: 1) a consistent low score on “familiarity with minority and world literatures in English,” suggesting the need for more faculty and more courses in these fields, and 2) a sustained increase in “familiarity with major critical approaches to literature,” suggesting that the relatively new requirement of our ENGL 301 course is fulfilling its goals.

Within the English major, students are allowed to pursue a degree with Honors. The requirements for graduating with Honors consist of: maintaining a GPA within the major of 3.25 or higher, taking at least 3 Honors seminars, and completing an Honors thesis which analyzes its topic in a sustained way, incorporates scholarly research, and proposes an original argument. All Honors theses are vetted by three faculty members who rank them according to a scale of “no distinction,” “distinction,” and “high distinction,” with the Honors Committee choosing among those ranked highly for two departmental awards.

Teaching of English (ToE) option

As part of the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) accreditation review, the Department of English regularly assesses its Teaching of English (ToE) option every 10 years. This assessment involves gathering, collating, and analyzing data pertaining to:

- admission rates of ToE students in the secondary education program,
- retention rates of ToE students enrolled in the secondary education program,
- test scores of ToE students completing the secondary education program,
- syllabi for all English department courses required of the ToE option,
- course objectives and their ability to prepare ToE students to meet state standards,
- the qualifications of English department faculty teaching ToE courses.

Historically, the ToE option has been found to prepare its students successfully for careers as secondary English teachers. Its students are typically in the top tier of all candidates tested by the state for secondary education certification; in 2008, all 9 UIUC students seeking state certification in English passed the exam for a success rate of 100%.

B. Rhetoric major

As noted above, the senior survey issued to all graduating majors was modified in 2006 to canvass Literature and Rhetoric majors separately. With the loss of the Professional Writing option, the questions specific to the Rhetoric major now focus on creative writing skills and coursework. Because the separate survey has been issued only for the past 2 years, no longitudinal trends have been tracked. The past year's results, however, indicate a general contentedness among Rhetoric majors, with two areas in need of improvement noted: "familiarity with contemporary fiction or poetry," and "ability to adapt expository writing to varying audiences/purposes." Approximately 13% of respondents indicated a strong desire to pursue an MFA degree in creative writing, suggesting that the remaining 87% of Rhetoric majors find the degree to have a broad cultural value.

C. Graduate program

Several measures are in place by which to assess the preparedness of our graduate students, including foreign language testing, a formal application to move from graduate coursework to specialized research in a chosen field ("stage II"), the special field exam, supervised research and writing of the dissertation, and the dissertation defense. The Director of Graduate Studies oversees the progress of all students through the Graduate program. She is assisted by faculty members representing various fields of study in American, British and anglophone world literatures, who serve on the Graduate Studies Committee. This committee vets all "stage II" applications, providing mentoring and feedback specific to the needs of individual students; the committee evaluates each student's strengths and weaknesses, suggesting future coursework and areas of study. The Director of Graduate Studies and the Graduate Studies Committee also provide written feedback on special field exam materials (the special field exam is the oral equivalent to PhD comps in other departments).

The English Department has a long tradition of assisting its graduate students in finding academic employment, tracking job placement data such as the type of school offering employment (e.g., research I university, regional state university, liberal arts college, community college) and whether the position is temporary or tenure-track. We provide a comprehensive job search service to our students, including mock interviews, dossier services, and individual feedback on job application materials. This service is overseen by a faculty member who serves as a placement director.

Based on graduate student demand, the graduate program has also worked cooperatively with the graduate student organization throughout the year to sponsor various workshops on professional issues, including how to submit conference proposals and write and present conference length papers, how to prepare and submit original research to peer-reviewed journals, and how to write fellowship applications.

Every year, the Department Head and Director of Graduate Studies note with interest the national ranking of English departments with graduate programs as reported by *US News and World Report*. For the past several years, the department's graduate program has been ranked among the top 20 programs in the nation, registering #18 this year.

II. Revised Assessment Plan—

A. Literature major

Because a number of students come to English after discovering their ineptitude in another field (e.g., pre-med), some of our majors begin with a low overall GPA. Many of these students come to realize that their talents and interests lie not in a field that fits their own or their parents' initial career ambitions but in literary study, at which they excel; others, however, have limited talents and abilities in the language arts. Because this second group of students continues to have difficulty fulfilling the requirements of English coursework, the department is considering implementing a minimum overall GPA requirement for its majors. Such a requirement would yield two benefits: it would refer "at risk" students without talent or interest in literary study to advisors who could offer appropriate remediation and direct them to more suitable courses of study, and it would enhance the classroom experience of all English majors by creating a cohort that was more uniform in its level of preparation and interest.

With this goal in mind, the department recently increased the minimum GPA required of its Honors students. Where it was pegged at 3.25, it now has been increased to 3.33 for students entering the Honors Program in AY '08-09. The intent of this change is to award the department's very best students with an Honors degree. It is also intended to steer students in need of writing assistance away from the Honors thesis credit which substitutes for the advanced composition requirement. Such a change should result in slightly fewer but better-written Honors theses.

The English Department plans to continue to administer the senior survey to its graduating majors. Although the Literature survey is well honed, recent additions include questions that specifically ask about a bias-free classroom climate, and whether the coursework, taken as a whole, provided a comprehensive sense of the

field of literary study. We will continue to track longitudinal changes with each year's results.

We will also implement an alumni survey to assess the extent to which our graduates continue to value their experience in the major. Given the long-term value of the "life skills" associated with the English major, we expect that, while satisfaction with the major will remain strong, the practical uses to which its practical "skills" are put will be various, perhaps even surprisingly so.

B. Teaching of English option

In undertaking the ISBE assessment of its ToE option this year, the English Department decided to appoint a special committee to review the Teaching of English option. Despite its statistical success (noted above), the ToE program is beset by problems of scheduling and morale. Because these problems have been registered anecdotally by both students and faculty, the goal of the internal assessment committee was to locate the sources of these problems and work toward possible solutions.

The first problem—scheduling—is endemic to the ToE option. In addition to meeting the requirements of the major (a total of 33 hours), ToE students must *also* take one course in English grammar, one on the theory and practice of composition, and an additional language or writing elective (for an additional 9 hours), *besides* completing the 44 hours required of the Education minor and its pre-requisites. This means that, in order to graduate with an English major and Education minor in four years, ToE students not only have to begin the ToE curriculum during their freshman year, but they have little room for electives once they are officially enrolled in the Education minor. Besides making it difficult for ToE students to meet all of their distribution requirements within four years, such a regimented schedule limits both the number and the type of students who pursue secondary education certification. While white women often self-identify as "teachers" in their freshman year, white male students and minority students of both sexes who decide to major in English after beginning other courses of study find that they cannot opt into the Teaching of English major because they would not be able to meet all of their requirements within four years. Such students typically complete the English major and pursue post-baccalaureate certification at another university. But, because this solution poses a potential financial burden on the students and their families in the form of additional tuition, many such students are discouraged from pursuing a career in secondary education.

The second problem—morale—is not unrelated to the first. The tightly structured schedule of the ToE major often limits the courses that such students can choose to fulfill requirements, forcing them to take courses that fit their schedules rather than those whose topics genuinely interest them. Moreover, English department faculty who teach courses primarily to this student constituency find that *their* schedules are mandated by the scheduling needs of these students, potentially leading to an irregular schedule of teaching assignments. The most significant morale issue of all, however, concerns the "fit" between coursework in the English major and Education minor. The internal ToE Assessment Committee reviewed syllabi for required courses from both departments in order to assess curricular gaps and

duplication. It concluded its review by meeting with Education faculty to discuss such issues as well as plan toward a possible revision of the ToE option.

Although our ToE students are successfully passing their state exams, they are not necessarily happy with their course of study. A senior survey specific to the ToE constituency is being drafted by which to assess what is and is not working within this option. It will be administered beginning in 2009.

C. Rhetoric major

The department is considering renaming or re-conceiving the Rhetoric major in light of its recent decision to drop the Professional Writing concentration. Whether the major is renamed “Creative Writing” to reflect its current focus, or is divided into two tracks—Creative Writing and Writing Studies—will be the subject of discussion among members of the curriculum committee this next year. In either case, the senior survey currently administered to Rhetoric majors will continue to be fine-tuned to assess the needs and experiences of the department’s Rhetoric majors.

D. Graduate program

The Graduate program will continue to oversee the progress of its graduate students as outlined above, introducing changes as necessary to better ensure its students’ preparation. One change introduced this past year has been to formalize the students’ entry into “stage III.” Previously, students automatically entered stage III upon the successful completion of the special field exam. The new recommendation requires that all four members of a student’s dissertation committee evaluate and approve a dissertation prospectus before the student begins writing. The intent of this change is twofold. It offers students immediate feedback on the outlined scope and feasibility of a project before they undertake it, thus enabling them more effectively to use their research and writing time. It also ensures that each of the four committee members understands his or her role on the committee, and establishes a sound and productive working relationship between the student and the committee.

The Graduate program will continue to track job placement data for its PhD and MFA recipients as outlined above. It will additionally implement an exit survey for graduate students by which to assess student satisfaction with their experience in coursework, preparation for the special field exam, dissertation advising, and defense. It will also track student profiles against job placement data, to determine if factors such as refereed publications correlate to research I positions and/or tenure-track jobs. This survey is in the process of being drafted and will be administered beginning in 2009.

The annual national rankings published by *US News and World Report* will continue to be noted, but, because such rankings are impressionistic rather than grounded in statistical data, the Graduate Program will refer to the report issued by the National Research Council (NRC), soon to be released by the Graduate College. This report includes data on graduate satisfaction with coursework, faculty mentoring, teaching, and job placement. It also provides a metric by which faculty productivity can be measured against faculty productivity in peer programs, thus allowing for a comparative assessment of our program in relation to peers in the Big 10 as well as those institutions also ranked in the top 20 of the *US News and World Report* ranking.

Any areas of weakness will be noted with strategies devised for introducing improvements to the UIUC English Graduate Program.

III. Plan for Using Results

The results of the senior exit surveys will help us identify any perceived weaknesses in each of the department's three major/options. We will continue to fine-tune the surveys to gather information that will be useful to any future plans for curricular reform. The alumni survey will allow us to track satisfaction with the major several years beyond graduation, providing us with information about how its "skills" are being actively applied in the workforce and valued in life. We will continue to work with the College of Education to track the satisfaction and attrition rates of secondary English teachers, well beyond the year they received their degrees.

The NRC data will allow the Graduate Program to ascertain a more accurate sense of its position within national rankings, based upon such factors as graduate satisfaction, job placement, and faculty productivity. Such information will allow us to identify weaknesses in the program that need to be addressed. Assuming that both the Graduate College and College of LAS are able to assist us in rectifying those problems, such information might ultimately allow us to be more successful in recruiting prospective graduate students as well as faculty. The Graduate Program will also implement its own exit survey for PhD and MFA students, allowing it to assess specific areas of graduate satisfaction as well as track the profiles of graduates who get jobs, the types of schools that employ them, and the level of employment offered. Again, this information will allow us to identify and address weaknesses such that the program as a whole may be strengthened.

Conclusion—

As indicated above, the English Department has been long engaged in various forms of internal assessment. Those forms include both statistical data, such as that rendered by ICES questionnaires and exit surveys, and anecdotal feedback, such as that which triggered our internal assessment of the Teaching of English option. Both types of information are important to the well functioning of any academic unit, and we intend to rely on both to trigger internal program reviews. For, while the statistical data from the ToE option indicated that that program is a success, the anecdotal evidence identified significant problems in need of address. This suggests that narratives—both personal and institutional—are useful means of rendering important "data" that fall outside of a quantitative method (itself based upon a "narrative" of what is deemed important). In complying with this mandate, the English Department is nonetheless concerned that the university is moving toward a business-oriented model of success, one premised upon the collection and analysis of primarily quantitative data, which symbolically diminishes the importance of narrative instruments. The value of the English major—with its inquiry into the relationship between language and truth, its emphasis upon different types and registers of meaning, and its insistence upon the plurality of interpretive possibilities—is a value that should be recognized institutionally, within the structure of the university.