Introduction

Prior to 2006-2007 the English Department had been responding collectively to student writing as part of our program review strategy. This practice of routinely setting aside segments of regular department meetings in order to allow for on-going assessment of student success enabled us to develop a set of descriptive criteria for papers at each letter-grade level in ENG 006: Studies in Literature, our introductory class that fulfills the general education requirement in Reading Imaginative Literature. We had committed ourselves:

- to continuing to hold at least one collective evaluation session each semester during a department meeting,
- to distributing the descriptive criteria to all students taking ENG 6 classes, and
- in three sections of ENG 6, to assessing students’ understanding of the qualities of essays at three representative grade levels both prior to receiving the criteria and then again at the end of the semester.

Our understanding was that such ongoing collective assessment of student success not only met WASC standards of evidence but also constituted significant progress toward fulfilling our program review commitments. It was, therefore, with some chagrin at the beginning of the 2006-2007 academic year that we found ourselves—like J. Alfred Prufrock—hearing the words “That is not it, at all, / That is not what I meant at all.”

As opposed to the ancien régime prior to Fall 2006, we found ourselves in an era in which our student learning results had to be sufficiently quantifiable to be “fix[ed] . . . in a formulated” Excel chart that could be “formulated, sprawling on a pin,” and left “pinned and wriggling on” a poster. Recognizing that we would soon be in the room where poster viewers come and go talking of program review cycle data points, we scrambled to come up with something sufficiently quantifiable to be posterized. But we did so with the sense that what were being imposed upon us were criteria that owed more to the procedures and methodologies of the social sciences than to the standards of evidence of WASC.

Informed that we had to devise “a complete list” of “specific learning outcomes” for all majors, we enumerated a list of “What We Want for Our Majors” that included 14 goals for our graduating majors as readers and 7 goals for our graduating majors as writers. We cross-referenced these 21 goals with the college-wide set of six learning standards, indicating which standards each of the 21 goals fulfilled. Then from this list of 21 goals we extracted a subset of ten goals (viz., goals 1, 2, 6, 9, 11, 12, 13, 16, 18, and 21) that we used in a December 2006 collective evaluation session of student papers, inscribing marginalia that consisted of the numbers of the attained goals alongside student sentences or paragraphs that demonstrated attainment of the enumerated goal so that our collective evaluation was wholly numerical. While this collective assessment of student writing extended departmental practice from previous years, we also devised two additional means of obtaining quantifiable indicators of student learning outcomes, as discussed below.
Program Goal # 2

In “What We Want for Our Majors” the Department of English published 21 learning outcomes for Westmont English majors. One learning outcome, which grows out of the college-wide learning standard in active societal and intellectual engagement, is that our graduating majors will

- Recognize how contexts (historical, cultural, biographical, literary) frame the work and shape its meaning. This includes both the context in which the writer produced the work and the context in which the reader reads it. (active societal and intellectual engagement and diversity) [Goal # 2]

Assessment Strategies

During Fall Semester 2006 we used pre- and post-testing in the required sophomore-level ENG 46: Survey of British Literature to 1800 to assess progress in students’ understanding of the cultural, biographical and historical contexts of literature of the 17th Century and of the Restoration and 18th Century. We also assessed students’ emerging mastery of literary terms, techniques, and genres. During Spring Semester 2007 we carried out pre-and post-testing in ENG 47: Survey of British Literature 1800 to the Present.

Benchmark for Assessment

Exams in ENG 46 and 47 are intentionally calibrated to test a broader array of contextual information than any one student is expected to know. Our expectation is for students to master 60% of the historical, cultural, biographical and literary contexts covered in each section of the exam.

Data

In ENG 46 students improved from 29% to 59% in their mastery of the historical, cultural, biographical, and literary contexts of 17th Century literature. They improved from 42% to 69% in their mastery of the historical, cultural, biographical, and literary contexts of Restoration and 18th Century literature. They showed a modest improvement from 40% to 48% in their knowledge of literary terms, techniques, and genres. Cumulatively they improved from 37% on the pre-test to 62% on the post-test.

Interpreting the Results

Although the pre-test in ENG 46 was administered at midterm prior to any formal instruction on 17th or 18th Century literature, a number of the questions inevitably addressed topics that had already been alluded to in prior lectures on medieval or 16th Century literature. As a result, some of the post-test results somewhat understate the gains students made in the course as a whole. While students attained the benchmark regarding Restoration and 18th Century literature (as well as on the post-exam as a whole), they just missed it regarding 17th Century literature. The relatively modest gain in student mastery of literary terms both points to the need for additional instruction in that area and to the need to reword some of the questions to gain greater clarity.
Next Steps

We have recognized that pre-testing needs to take place on the first day of class in ENG 46 and 47. In Spring Semester 2007 a pre-test was administered on the first day of class in ENG 47 Survey of British Literature 1800-Present, and we will continue to pre-test and post-test both classes next year. In discussing the results of the ENG 46 post-exam we realized that several faculty in the department hold critical presuppositions that would lead them to give different responses than the expected “correct” answer. There is no disagreement regarding the historical, cultural or biographical contexts of 17th or 18th Century literature, but there is variance in our sense of how we are to understand the “I” in a lyric poem. Therefore, our students may have absorbed differing critical approaches from our diverse faculty rather than just not learning what the professor of record was teaching. In any event, that has provided a helpful context in which to place our students’ otherwise disappointing results regarding terminology. We have realized the need for more in-depth conversation among ourselves regarding our literary presuppositions.

Program Goals # 3, 1, 16, 21

In “What We Want for Our Majors” the Department of English has published 21 learning outcomes for Westmont English majors. As part of those learning outcomes, we expect our graduating majors to be able to:

- Access scholarly material using appropriate online bibliographic tools (e.g., MLA International Bibliography, World Shakespeare Bibliography, JSTOR, Humanities Index, Article First). (research and technology) [Goal # 3]
- Summarize, analyze, and evaluate any piece of writing in any genre: to be able to articulate what the writer is saying (content), how he or she has chosen to present the message (techniques and strategies), and why he or she might have chosen to do it that way (effects and purposes). (critical-interdisciplinary thinking) [Goal #1]
- Write correct, clear, readable, persuasive and lively prose. This includes mastering the basics of grammar and mechanics, and basic grammatical terms. (written and oral communication) [Goal # 16]
- Incorporate the voices of others into their writing, skillfully acknowledging their indebtedness to the thinking and research of others while providing appropriate documentation in MLA format. (research and technology) [Goal # 21]

The expectation that students will be able to access scholarly material using appropriate online bibliographic tools grows out of the college-wide learning standard in research and technology. The expectation that students will be able to analyze not only the “what” but also the “how” and the “why” of material they read grows out of the college-wide learning standard in critical-interdisciplinary thinking. The expectations that students will write correct, clear, readable, persuasive and lively prose and that they will incorporate quotations into their writing skillfully grow out of the college-wide learning standard in written and oral communication. The expectation that students will document sources accurately using MLA format grows out of the college-wide learning standard in research and technology.
Assessment Strategies

As one means toward achieving the above learning outcomes, the department requires all majors to complete a bibliographic essay or annotated bibliography in order to demonstrate their analytical skills, their writing skills, their research skills and their skill at documenting their research. This requirement of writing a bibliographic essay is embedded in our major requirements. Each major is required to take a major authors course in Shakespeare, Chaucer, or Milton and each of those courses requires a research project or bibliographic essay.

Our attached criteria for evaluating student learning in bibliographic research projects grow out our rubric of descriptive criteria for papers at each letter grade, published on our departmental website as “Criteria for Writing about Literature.”

Benchmarks for Assessment

Our goal is for 100% of our majors to attain competence, 80% of our majors to achieve proficiency, and 60% of our majors to achieve mastery of each learning outcome.

Results

Bibliographic essays prepared by students in ENG 117: Shakespeare during Fall Semester 2006 were collectively assessed by English faculty and yielded the following results:

97% of students completing the sample set of bibliographic essays attained competence in research, with proficiency also achieved by 97% and mastery by 83%

97% of students in that same sample set attained competence in the ability to summarize, analyze, and evaluate with proficiency achieved by 90% and mastery by 59%.

97% of students in the sample set attained competence in writing correct, clear, readable, persuasive prose, with proficiency by 83% and mastery by 62%.

95% of students in that same sample set attained competence in incorporating the voices of others, with proficiency by 83% and mastery by 55%.

98% of students in that same sample set attained competence in documentation and bibliographic form, with proficiency by 95% and mastery by 74%.

Interpreting the Results

After two years of practice, the department has developed habits of collective paper grading and calibration. The assignment of writing a bibliographic essay is a requirement of all majors that is incorporated into each of the major authors courses the department teaches. In the most recent sample set, a gratifying number of students are showing not just competence but proficiency in the learning outcomes identified above. Gratifyingly, on the most recent sample set of bibliographic essays, our majors attained the benchmark for proficiency in each of the categories being evaluated. From 2% to 5% of our students did not achieve the level of competence, a level that we think is attainable for 100% of our students. Although our students attained the benchmarks for mastery in research, writing ability and in documentation form, they just missed the benchmark for mastery in analytical ability and (by a wider margin) the benchmark for incorporating quotations into their own prose.
Next Steps

We have become people who grade papers collectively and are realizing that our students are gaining some of the skills we hope they will master. Articulating our shared goals to students is helpful for their learning, and therefore we have published on our departmental website the list of 21 goals of “What We Want for Our Majors.” We will move toward having every upper division course refer students to those goals on the website. Although a one-page grading rubric was distributed to students with comments regarding their mature draft of the bibliographic essay, we now realize that it would be helpful to distribute the full list of criteria for each level of accomplishment—and to make such information available when students are beginning to work on the project rather than waiting until they have completed a mature draft. In order to help more students attain mastery of the art of incorporating the voices of others into their prose, we will prepare a departmental handout on strategies for direct and indirect quotation.

Submitted by: Dr. Paul Delaney, Professor of English
For the Westmont College Department of English
Appendix A: Quantified, Posterized Results of Pre- and Post-Testing in ENG 46.
Appendix B: Departmental criteria for mastery, proficiency, and competence in the bibliographic essay required in major authors courses:

Research

Mastery

- The paper relies on sources that are all clearly related to the same central topic.
- The paper incorporates at least eight appropriately scholarly sources from refereed journals or scholarly books.
- The paper relies on at least four scholarly articles from refereed journals in addition to any chapters or essays from book sources.
- The student indicates the bibliographic tools—including some online bibliographic tools (e.g., MLA International Bibliography, World Shakespeare Bibliography, JSTOR)—used to identify each source.
- The essay includes at least five scholarly sources from the last 10 years with no sources more than 20 years old.

Proficiency

- The paper incorporates at least eight sources most of which are from scholarly books or refereed journals, though a few may consist of less substantial sources such as book reviews, dissertation abstracts, or newsletter articles.
- The critical sources may not always be clearly related to the same topic.
- The student has obtained appropriate sources but failed to indicate the bibliographic tools used to identify each source.
- The essay includes at least five scholarly sources from the last 15 years with no sources more than 30 years old

Competence

- The paper incorporates at least eight sources but some may not be appropriately scholarly.
- The student relies exclusively on sources from books or exclusively on sources from journals rather than demonstrating the bibliographic skill necessary to access both books and journals.
- The essay includes at least five scholarly sources from the last 20 years with no sources more than 40 years old.

Unsatisfactory

- Many of the student’s sources rely on non-scholarly material such as popular magazines or non-refereed web sites.
- Several of the student’s sources are more than 30 years old.
Use of Quotations

Mastery

- All quotations are skillfully incorporated into the writer’s prose either by being woven smoothly into the flow of a sentence or by being provided with an appropriate introduction followed by a colon.
- The writer analyzes each quotation, telling readers explicitly how the passage serves as evidence for a point the writer is making.

Proficiency

- All quotations are attached to the writer’s prose grammatically, with enough context to indicate how the passage serves as evidence for a point the writer is making.
- Although quotations are well integrated into sentences, the writer may tend to rely solely on direct quotes rather than paraphrase or summary.

Competence

- All quotations are attached to the writer’s prose grammatically but sometimes with rudimentary phrases that just consist of “the author says.”
- The writer sometimes fails to explain what he or she sees in a quotation, seeming to expect that readers will automatically see whatever the writer sees.
- Quotations may be poorly integrated into sentences, or they may be offered with analysis which does little more than to restate the quotation.

Unsatisfactory

- Quotations do not fit together grammatically with the writer’s prose.
- Some quotations are included without any attempt to connect them to the writer’s prose.
- The paper fails to include any quotations as evidence, or consists largely of quotations that go unanalyzed.
- The writer has committed plagiarism, offering direct quotations as if they were paraphrase.
Documentation

Mastery

• Every quotation or paraphrase has parenthetic documentation in MLA format.
• Every author referred to in the text is listed in the List of Works Cited.
• All entries in the List of Works Cited are alphabetized by author (as opposed to being alphabetized by the name of an editor or a title).
• Each journal article is listed with the title of the essay, title of the journal, volume number, date, and page numbers—with all items punctuated in MLA style.
• Each book is listed with the author, title, place of publication, publisher, and date—with all items punctuated in MLA style.

Proficiency

• All information that MLA style calls for is provided, but some entries are not properly punctuated.
• Sometimes the writer uses abbreviations like “vol.” or “no.” rather than following MLA style.

Competency

• Most of the information that MLA style calls for is provided, but sometimes in incorrect order.
• Page numbers are provided for journal articles but not for items that appeared in collections of essays.
• Bibliographic information is provided for reprinted essays but without full information regarding where and when the essay first appeared.
• Full bibliographic information is provided but without proper use of quotation marks for article titles or of italics for the titles of books, plays and journals.

Unsatisfactory

• Entries are not alphabetized.
• Necessary information is omitted.
• There is no indication of the bibliographic tools used to identify each source.
• Some authors cited in the text do not appear in the List of Works Cited.
• Some authors mentioned in the List of Works Cited are not, in fact, cited in the text.
• The writer has committed plagiarism, offering some other person’s analysis of a source without fully documenting the source of documentation.
Writing Correct, Clear, Readable, Persuasive Prose

Mastery
• The paper gives a strong sense of the writer’s voice and holds the readers’ interest.
• The writer seems always to keep in mind a lively, literate audience.
• The paper is well organized with elegant transitions.
• The essay’s vigorous language pleases readers. The writer has taken some risks and gotten away from formulas in writing.
• The writer supports generalizations effectively, using vivid examples, quoting critical sources effectively, and paraphrasing when useful.
• The writer completely avoids sentence fragments, run-on sentences and comma splices.

Proficiency
• The paper shows a strong sense of writing to an interested audience.
• Language is sometimes used colorfully or imaginatively.
• The writer’s voice or personality comes through in prose that has few errors in usage, spelling, or syntax.
• The writer completely avoids sentence fragments, but may uncharacteristically lapse into occasional comma splices.

Competence
• The paper restates what critical sources have said but without stimulating insight into the work being discussed.
• Though the writer has generally used language correctly, there are a few distracting errors in usage, spelling, syntax, or punctuation.
• The paper may have several run-on sentences or comma splices.

Unsatisfactory
• The paper has major problems in sentence structure, grammar and diction.
• The paper shows a poor sense of audience and purpose.
• The content largely consists of unsupported generalizations about critical sources.
• Points are inadequately developed and sometimes erroneous.
• The paper is poorly organized with ideas jumbled together so that it is difficult to follow.
• The paper contains sentence fragments, run-on sentences, or frequent comma splices.
Analysis

Mastery
- Clearly and convincingly provides a framework in which readers are able to grasp the distinctive strengths of each critical perspective.
- Identifies crucial similarities and differences among the various sources.
- Offers fresh, original ways to think about the critical landscape.
- Demonstrates clear grasp of the questions posed by the critical sources being examined.
- Clearly and accurately summarizes the contributions or limitations of each critical source.

Proficiency
- Generally explains the central contribution of each source, offering a clear account of its arguments.
- On the whole grasps the strengths and limitations of each critical source.

Competence
- Provides an accurate account of what each source says, but without a clear delineation of the differences among the critical perspectives.
- Sometimes recognizes the contributions but may not be able to address the limitations of critical sources under discussion.
- Tends to make points that are left undeveloped—or just reiterated.

Unsatisfactory
- Fails to recognize the central idea of each critical source.
- Mistakenly offers an incidental point as if it were the main thrust of a critic’s argument.
- Just repeats the words of the author without sufficient understanding to paraphrase clearly.
- Commits plagiarism by offering someone else’s analysis of a source as if it were the writer’s own.