Introduction

As we progress through program review, the English Department remains committed to stewarding all that, as Gerard Manley Hopkins reminds us, God has created as “counter, original, spare, strange” in teaching and learning. We hold that commitment while recognizing our glimpses of that “pied beauty” in our students’ learning will often leave us asking along with the poet “who knows how?”

With that continuing sense that the program review process does not yet comfortably reinforce what we value as an English Department in the Christian Liberal Arts tradition, we have an increased confidence that we can make parts of this process benefit in some ways our interactions with our students. This report presents the English Department’s program review activities during the 2004-2005 program review year. Our efforts at developing a program review process that reinforces our student-learning goals even partially have been recognized by the Program Review Committee in moving our department’s final report in this review cycle forward from its originally scheduled deadline in Spring 2007 to Fall of 2006. This report documents our progress since our special report to the Program Review Committee in September.

Program Goal #1

For the 2004-2005 academic year we chose to focus on the first of the four goals from our January 2004 proposal:

1. We want our majors to be able to use and to recognize metaphor in imaginative writing and critical discourse. More broadly, we want them to show evidence of thinking analogically.

While this goal is specific to the study of literature and language, and therefore a goal specific to our major, it is also tied to the college-wide Written and Oral Communication standard. In keeping with our commitment not to impose a social scientific approach to assessing the humanities, we have not established a “benchmark” for this goal. However, as the latter parts of this report will explain, we have reached some conclusions about student success based on our exploration of how English majors are approaching this goal in our classes, and we have established criteria for reasonable conclusions about students’ abilities to think analogically.

Data for Goal #1

Several faculty members gathered individual student papers from the 2004-2005 academic year that showed students’ attempts to think analogically in their own writing. Papers came from across courses and varied in grades assigned. Our paper set was small, but sufficiently extensive to provide evidence of a range of student success and of developing skills. (Both the paper set and department minutes from this session are stored in the Assessment File on the department’s shared hard drive.)
Strategies for Evaluating Student Success Toward Goal #1

Strategy: Meet for a session of collective paper reading to assess how our students’ written work reflects their progress specifically toward goal #1.

We met in September 2005 for a collective paper reading session to focus on the department’s goal #1, “Thinking Analogically.” This session drew on experiences in our July 2004 paper grading session, and allowed us to work with more refined strategies. (The July 2004 session is described in the English Department’s September 2005 Program Review Report).

Interpretation of the Data for Goal #1

The discussion of the paper set documenting our students’ abilities to think analogically (goal #1) demonstrated that by the time they are writing as seniors at least some of our students are able to use analogies effectively (avoiding dead metaphors and clichés) to develop their own thinking about topics as varied as a professional theatre production, spiritual growth, cross-cultural encounters, and the death of a loved one. Students demonstrated these skills in a range of courses. That paper set also demonstrates that we have students at the sophomore and junior level who still need to hone these skills as writers.

The paper set we gathered for this session arguably meets WASC’s criteria for good evidence; it is relevant, verifiable, representative and actionable (Evidence Guide, 9-12). We are working with evidence, then, to support our conclusions that our students are accomplishing at least one part of one of our learning goals. For the initial purpose of program review, graduating English majors can demonstrate the ability to think analogically in their own writing. Based on this preliminary conclusion, we see ample reason to stay the course in many of the ways we teach reading and writing as our current teaching strategies are accomplishing one part of one learning goal we have set for our students.

Though we have not yet found ample evidence for pedagogical revisions beyond the development of a departmental writing rubric, we will continue to refine our assessment strategies. The department concluded that the paper set collected this year was inadequate to help us confidently evaluate whether or not most graduating English majors can effectively recognize analogical thinking when they encounter it in literature or other writing. We would need an additional session to assess those reading skills. The session also raised several questions about whether we are in agreement about precisely what we mean by analogical thinking, and prompted discussion of possible refinements in our January 2004 Assessment Plan.

Our discussions of student essays have suggested that department members might eventually want more comprehensive data to draw conclusions that we find satisfyingly indicative, informative or conclusive about student learning. As a result of these internal concerns, and of the feedback offered by the Program Review Committee, we have developed some refined strategies for interpreting data from paper sets, which are described in the following discussion of Strategy A.

New Departmental Program Review Strategy

Strategy A: Meet to discuss and develop a departmental rubric, or descriptive criteria, for papers at each letter grade. We will then distribute and discuss this rubric in all English classes.
In our first collective paper session (July 2004), we decided that it would be helpful, though possibly only qualifiedly so, to develop a departmental rubric, or descriptive criteria, for papers at each of the different grade levels. We affirmed that decision in our second collective paper reading session (September 2005).

We still have some questions about the pedagogical value of such a guide: Will we see sufficient improvement in student writing to make up for collective class time lost in discussing the rubric? Will a writing rubric lead to the kind of consistent quality that made MacDonald’s famous? Regardless of its effect on student writing, will the presentation of such a rubric cultivate the impression in students that we are looking for that consistent mediocrity, rather than vibrant writing that relies on particular evidence and demonstrates a unique voice? In spite of our lingering questions, we concluded that each of us would profit from the discussion necessary to create these descriptive criteria, and that this discussion would bring to light more best teaching practices and the possibility of sharing solutions to address the inevitable frustrations of teaching writing.

Our second goal for 2004-2005, while not a measure of student learning, is a program review goal that will help us evaluate the agreement in individual faculty response to student writing. Furthermore, as the discussion of data will show, we will gauge some part of the success of student learning in each of these collective paper reading sessions.

In November 2005 we held the first of a series of meetings that will allow us to collectively read several papers with differing levels of student success and to establish a description of each letter grade for papers in our general education literature courses, primarily English 6.

The development of a set of descriptive criteria for grading will directly address the Program Review Committee’s concerns about consistency in evaluating student achievement of our learning goals.

Data for Strategy A

When we met to read the first student paper (a review of the Theater Department’s production of Richard II), we distributed the paper without faculty comments, and with no letter grade. Each member of the department then discussed what grade he or she would assign this paper. Data includes both the student paper and the discussion recorded in department meeting minutes for 29 November 2005.

Common observations about the paper included mention of the student’s close observation of some surprising level of detail in staging and in sound; the absence of a thesis or a coherent line of reasoning; a persistent, distracting level of mechanical errors, often obfuscating meaning.

While we did not agree precisely on what grade the student paper should receive, we came to consensus that it was a D paper, with some members of the department leaning toward D- and others toward D+.

The discussion of this essay also prompted consideration of the context that might legitimately cause this level of variation in a grade assigned to a paper: the number of times a faculty member had addressed certain compositional issues with a student already during the semester; the timing of the essay in the semester calendar (earlier papers might get more leniency when the faculty member wanted to encourage the level of observation the student seemed to reach for in
this essay); the emphasis in a given assignment on certain compositional elements that the student had attempted or failed.

**Interpretation of the Data for Strategy A**

Working from department minutes we have developed the following description of a “D” level paper for English 6:

**Makes some verbal gestures toward the stated objectives for the assignment, but does not master any of those objectives or reveals confusion about the learning objectives.** Contains a few fresh insights, but lacks a coherent organizing strategy. Commits a sufficient level of mechanical errors to hinder meaning, to distract the reader or to damage the writer’s credibility. Shows no systematic attempt to respond to previous feedback or instruction on successful writing strategies.

This discussion made clear that descriptive criteria more closely fit department ethos than a traditional rubric. Working with descriptive criteria also allays some of our concerns about the mediocrity that might result in student learning from too much emphasis in faculty comments on consistency.

When we have descriptions for each letter grade, we plan to frame the criteria with a statement acknowledging that there are no Platonic ideals for grades, making it difficult to match a single paper entirely to one description. For instance, a paper may earn a B for achieving some elements of an A-level paper and for incorporating some elements of a C-level paper. The frame for these criteria should also take into some account the possible causes in variation that we discussed, namely the timing of the assignment in the course of the semester.

**Using the Results Generated with Strategy A**

This discussion took one half hour of a department meeting, and was a productive and encouraging conversation, especially at a point in the semester when we all begin to feel like voices crying in the wilderness.

The sense of shared standards for student success (or in the case of this paper, for near student failure), encouraged us to maintain those standards as we faced end-of-the-semester stacks of essays.

The session also demonstrated the sustainability of this kind of conversation in the life of the department and the possibility of completing Descriptive Criteria for General Education Courses in English during the 2005-2006 academic year.

**Next Steps in Program Review**

To finish the descriptive criteria, we will take half an hour at a department meeting every month until we have established a clear description for each letter grade assigned in English 6. We also realized in this session that discussion in future meetings will have more pedagogical content if each faculty member writes down the grade he or she would assign before we begin discussion.
We have agreed that we could sustain this level of discussion as a pattern, collectively reading student papers at department meetings to “check in” on teaching strategies and to consider collectively the issues we face in student learning and success. While we recognize that the best strategies may lose their effectiveness when they are overused, we may turn to descriptive criteria for upper-division English courses when we have finished meeting to establish criteria for English 6.