Introduction

The Theatre Arts Department’s work with program review has focused on three main tools for the 2005-2006 school year. Some of this work – primarily the refinement and further development of our departmental Senior Projects – was detailed in our five-year report, written in January of 2006. In that report, we described the work accomplished with our Senior Projects, and chronicled the changes in the projects, the departmental discussions that motivated them, and the resultant changes in student work. In addition, we included a great amount of external review material as evidence of the many successes that Westmont students have had in the Theatre Arts program over a five-year period.

In this end of year review, the Theatre Arts Department reflects on the our primary goal, which reads: Westmont College Theatre Arts students will cultivate their own individual creative spirits, and display the necessary imagination, technical expertise, and courageous self-discipline necessary for effective, dynamic work on the stage. In the report, the department looked at three “tools” to provide evidence for this area for the most recent school year. The tools are:

- Evidence of and reflections on our newest round of Senior Projects, providing evidence for one project, completed at the end of spring 2006, and outlining departmental discussions that led to subsequent refinement of this program review tool.
- Evidence of and reflection on the Westmont Senior Interview instrument as it relates to work in the Theatre Arts Department.
- Evidence of and reflection on our Majors Interview program, where departmental faculty interviews all majors at the end of each semester.

Departmental Assessment Tool # 1 – Senior Projects

In the view of the Theatre Arts faculty, the spring 2006 group of Senior Projects demonstrated marked improvement in conception and theatrical effectiveness from previous years, and constitutes some of the best projects in the department’s history. This is partially because of a talented and self-motivated group of seniors, but the department’s intentional strategy in project development, and the intentional work of the faculty, is at least partially responsible for the excellence of student work.

In the late fall of 2005, students intending to graduate at the end of the 2006 school year were provided an outline of the purpose and nature of the Theatre Arts Senior Project. Departmental faculty discussed the document with a group of seniors in a lengthy meeting. Portions of the document follow:
Theatre Arts Senior Projects are conceived as a capstone experiences for majors. These projects are meant to both coalesce the work done by students during their careers at Westmont, and also transcend it, by demonstrating individual conceptual faculties and methods of work evidenced in a project of the students’ choosing. In collaboration with a faculty committee, and headed by a faculty mentor, students choose a project from one of a number of possibilities: students can perform, direct, choreograph, write a play, or write a final substantive research paper. Students will be evaluated on intention, process, and theatrical effectiveness of the Senior Projects, and relate to our desire to help encourage imaginative theatre work, technical expertise, and courageous self-discipline during students’ careers at Westmont.

Intention

- Student will provide a clearly articulated statement of purpose for their project, including choice of material, range of theatrical and/or dramatic influences, and a personal statement regarding why this project at this time will culminate their experience at Westmont.

Process

- Student will develop and organize ideas for theatrical performance with faculty mentors and fellow student collaborators, including, but not limited to, visual ideas, ideas for action, relationship to audience, and conceptual approach. Student will keep a journal of the development of these ideas, and chronicle the evolution of the piece in written form, in consultation with faculty mentor.
- Student will organize rehearsal and performance schedule; be prompt, punctual, and organized; will manage student collaborators; will enlist necessary support personnel; and will stay in contact with faculty mentor regarding any problems that may arise through the process.

Execution and Theatrical Effectiveness

- Public Performance occurs as scheduled.
- Major intentions of student, as provided in Intention document and in the student’s journal, are communicated and made evident through the performance.
- Student is evaluated in terms of achieving the goals they set for themselves, as well as theatrical principles including, but not limited to expressive clarity, structural integrity, performative energy, and aesthetic wholeness.
- Student has interview with faculty panel that provides both oral and written evaluation of the project.
- Student provides faculty with self-assessment of the project.
- Student will keep a journal or logbook for each rehearsal for the project, detailing the process, methods, approaches, struggles, and successes of their work on the project.

The last bullet point listed above (journal or logbook) was added to this list in a short departmental meeting that the faculty had just prior to the meeting with students.
The following represents a sampling of faculty response and student self-assessment from one student’s Senior Project for the Spring of 2006.

Response by Mitchell Thomas, project mentor:

This project epitomized what I envision an ideal senior project to be. In reading Erin’s intention, journals, self-assessment, as well as attending rehearsals and performance of her piece, it is very clear that she has grown immeasurably in the process of creating Sylvia’s Path. Her intention was specific, but open to exploration, and very honest about her own fears and challenges as they related to the material and her own journey as an actor/director. Erin’s journals are excellent. Searching, questioning, tortured, joyous, full of her own writing, Sylvia Plath’s words, images, and ideas and it is fascinating to read about the development of the piece and Erin’s process of creating it. Finally, the execution of the piece was stunning, and showed a level of maturity, focus, and creativity that belongs in the professional world of performance. I saw the show twice, and each time was moved by her performance and proud of her achievement. In her own words, Erin achieved “all she intended to do and more.”

Intention: A
Process: A+
Final Grade: A +

Report From John Blondell, Committee Member

As I have indicated on several occasions, this is an excellent project, and constitutes some (if not the) finest student work I have seen from an undergraduate. The piece was complete, compelling, constantly fascinating, and very moving and disturbing. I believe that Erin brought together so much of her theatre education in this piece: performance, directing, and design certainly, but also a conceptual dimension that is striking. She speaks so well about the piece, as well as performs it well. Some of my favorite moments, in no particular order, include the overflowing sink, the shower, finding the ring in the sand, the sand, the exit, meeting the audience in the beginning, the configuration and contact with the audience, and of course the committed and genuine and captivating acting work. This piece is completely complete – a marvelous piece of theatrical work, a piece that belies her years. I think that Erin should continue to make pieces like this: she’s found something here, and I hope she continues working in this vein. This work is the epitome of what we would want our students’ work to convey and contain. It is truly a marvel.

Portions of student self-assessment

This project has had a dramatic impact on my self-confidence and my honesty. I have learned far more than I ever thought I would, about things that I wasn’t even expecting to learn. I learned that in order for me to trust myself, I must experiment and take risks in order to gain more self-confidence; also, that no matter how hard I work on a project, the end result is ultimately out of my hands and all I can do is surrender it as a gift.
I feel that this project was a great way for me to incorporate what I have learned at my time at Westmont and for me to have the opportunity to share it with others. I am so thankful that I chose to do a one-woman show based on Sylvia Plath. I feel that the vision and materials I used were effective in making this an expressive and touching piece. I am so thankful for the encouragement from all the professors and students, and I hope they enjoyed the finished product as much as I did. I have worked hard on this piece and I am proud of myself and so grateful for this opportunity. Thank you!

Review from SB Independent:
“Erin Brehm as Sylvia Plath stole the evening show with her composition ‘Sylvia’s Path’...uncomfortably intimate….her portrayal was chilling.” – Felicia Tamasko

Closing the Loop

The department is pleased and proud of the work of this project. The student felt a great sense of accomplishment, faculty members commented upon the effectiveness and sophistication of the work, and the outside reviewer commented on its success. The department’s faculty continues to discuss the Senior Project, and continues to refine it, but we are satisfied, I should say excited, by the changes that have resulted since we have chosen to highlight it as an important assessment tool in our department. We now have a sound structure – and a complete process – that can help ensure the success of Senior Projects. In future years, we may come back to touch on how this tool is working in our department, but our plans are now to move on to new tools and strategies, pleased with the success the project is enjoying at this time.

Assessment Tool # 2 – Senior Interviews

In addition to continuing with our work with Senior Projects, this report uses the college-wide Senior Interview tool – stressing the departmental component – to help analyze students’ development over their period of residency at the college. In ongoing departmental discussions, the Theatre Arts faculty has found this to be a key tool that gives evidence of students’ development and learning, and provides us feedback regarding what students think works in our department, and what areas need improvement. The department met on May 18th to discuss both the Senior Projects and the Senior Interview tool, and we have made several substantive changes in our program from what we learned from that discussion. The following passages provide analyses for three Senior Interviews completed in our department for the 2005-2006 school year. The interviews were conducted by professors Mitchell Thomas, John Blondell, and Erlyne Whiteman.

Graduating Senior #1
Interviewed by Asst. Professor Mitchell Thomas
In interviewing graduating senior #1, it became very clear to me that she has had a truly wonderful experience here at Westmont. She exhibits significant growth in most categories, and speaks about her education in extremely positive ways. She has felt “challenged and supported, and I have experienced life-changing growth”. In her self-assessment of the college wide learning standards, she averaged a 5.8 coming in to Westmont, and left with an average of 8.3 out of 10. In our departmental response form, which was designed to assess specific departmental goals, she averaged a 5.5 coming in to Westmont, and left with an average of 9.25 out of 10. It was also clear to me during the interview how important the theatre department has been to her self-described growth in nearly all categories.

One of the student’s concerns for the whole community was a re-prioritization of cultivating a diverse faculty and student body. This is also the standard that she experienced the least growth in (moving from a 7 to an 8). This concern is a top priority to the administration, and the college as a whole recognizes diversity as a continuing priority of Westmont. Erin pointed out that the Globe Series, which is a theatre arts program that brings in international artists and scholars to interact with the students, was very important in her education, and contributed to her understanding of diversity in terms of performance style, culture, and heritage.

Departmentally, I was encouraged to see that the student listed 6 different courses in the major as particularly influential in her development as a theatre artist. She also listed theatre courses as particularly influential in 5 of the 6 Westmont learning standards. This leads me to believe that her education within the department has supported her not only as an artist, but also as a Christian liberal arts graduate. She encouraged the continued growth of student created work, which she feels allows for more students outside the major to be able to participate in the department. In our department discussion, we agreed with her remark, and are actively working to create more opportunities for student work in the coming year in two ways: 1) to create a fall project that encourages students to write, direct, and act in their own original material, and 2) to supplement the student project budget for the coming year so that there is more financial support available for students to create their own projects and achieve their goals.

In conclusion, it is my observation that the student’s experience here has been a “success”. The data from the self-assessment, her comments, and my own observation of her work and progress attest to her development and growth during her time here at Westmont, and confirm that she has received a “large and rich Christian liberal arts” education, and is on a trajectory to continue her work and learning in the world.

Graduating Student # 2
Interviewed by Professor John Blondell

In the estimation of both the department and the student in question, Senior # 2 demonstrated life-changing successes during her years at Westmont College. She thrived here, received the Outstanding Senior Award from departmental faculty, and maintained a 4.0 grade point average in the major. In analyzing the student’s Senior Response Form
for Theatre Arts, it is clear that she experienced tremendous growth and development in the department, found the department challenging, and grew in numerous ways. The student was home schooled, and acknowledges that she came into the college with little experience and knowledge relative to the standards that the department has set. As an incoming student, most of her “scores” are in the 1-3 range, and average 2.25. Her “scores” upon leaving the college are all in the 9-10 range, except for one, which actually reveals a weakness in how the standard is phrased that will be commented upon below. These scores average 8.75.

In analyzing the student’s responses, it is immediately evident that the majority of her Theatre Arts classes had significant impact on her. The student suggests that the courses most influential and helpful included Directing I & II, the Senior Projects, Acting I, Design for the Theatre, Theory & Criticism in the Arts, Dramatic Theory and Criticism, and Theatre History I and II. These courses comprise the core of our major, and it is clear from her written responses, as well as verbal ones in the interview, that these courses made significant impact on the student’s theatrical development, clearly indicated in some of the student’s responses. When asked to consider her response to the first standard – *Student displays innovation, originality, and creativity in theatre work*, the student says, “It’s hard to say, objectively, how much of this my work displays, but my conceptions of theatre have been exploding and being rebuilt constantly over the last four years, with my thoughts and inspiration constantly leading me in new and unknown directions. The more I learn, think, and experience the more possibilities open themselves to me.” When asked to consider her response to our final standard – *Student has the ability to create their own theatre work, and possesses the appropriate theoretical and historical contexts to understand its place in the cultural dynamics of the past and present* – the student says, “My directing work has been directly and explicitly influenced by studying [Dramatic Theory and Criticism] – I’ve been testing ideas related to the construction of identity and various layers of control. I’m still figuring out how to make this exchange go the other way – to understand/derive theory and cultural history form doing practical/theatrical work.”

It is also clear that a great deal of the student’s learning experience occurred in situations outside the traditional classroom experience, including assistant directing faculty directed plays; attending workshops, talks, and performances at the Lit Moon World Theater Festival; and participating in the seminars and classes developed through the department’s Globe Series of International Theatre Residencies. The department discussed this perception at great length, because it is a significant, common theme that runs through this year’s Senior Interviews. In the student’s own words, these programs “changed her,” and the student mentioned time and again in the interview that she views these experiences as some of the most valuable ones experienced at the college. Through these experiences the faculty concluded that we must continue to pursue funding that can keep these valuable experiences alive. Our students are growing significantly from their exposure to the cultures and theatre cultures of other parts of the world, and the faculty has concluded that maintaining these programs are of utmost priority.
In departmental discussions regarding the Senior Interviews, it became clear that we need to change the wording of one of our standards. Presently, one of our standards reads, **Student possesses a deep and broad understanding of the traditional heritage of world performing traditions.** The student responded in this way to the standard: “I know the development of western theatrical performance very well… I’ve seen a lot of contemporary non-western performance here and there, but I don’t have much of a grasp of the traditions they come from.” As the department discussed this, it became more and more clear that the issue comes mostly from the language used in the standard, than any real deficiency in the department. The department is a small department, has expertise largely related to western theatre, and therefore do not have the knowledge to teach Asian, African, or Latin American Theatre in depth. Consequently, the department is in conversations related to re-wording this standard, while at the same time looking for opportunities to expand some of our knowledge into other parts of the world of which we are unfamiliar.

**Senior Interview #3**  
**Interviewed by Associate Professor Erlyne Whiteman**

The majority of this student’s interview related to institutional aspects, but there are several points in the departmental profile that are worth mentioning.

Within the Theatre Department, this student experienced a great deal of growth in the **Written and Oral Communication Standard.** She came from a small social group and was somewhat quiet as both a student and performer when she entered as a first-year student. She entered with a 2 and felt that she grew to an 8. She shared that “this has always been an especially difficult area for me, but I have definitely grown a lot. There is always more room for improvement”. This improvement was not due to any lack on the part of the departmental courses and opportunities for performance, but rather due to her admitted inability to reach what she had hoped to be her full-potential. She does plan on further study in voice and acting and especially enjoyed her semester in the Film Studies program her senior year. She spoke highly of the coursework in theatre and the professors; and felt that, along with the Film Studies program, has a solid foundation for work in Theatre. She hopes to pursue acting in film in Los Angeles. She is grateful for her time at Westmont, for the encouragement of professors and for the experiences she has gained in student-life on campus and in Los Angeles. The only area in which she encouraged our department to pursue further was in the area of allowing students to create their own creative work earlier in the four years, which we have been doing with our sophomores with guidance from mentors within the department.

**Final Comment**

These interviews have been highly informative for the Theatre Arts faculty. They have provided the subject matter for several departmental meetings, and informal conversations. Generally, they suggest that the content of our courses provides students with the important knowledge and conceptual tools that we want for our students, and
highlight the significance of extra-classroom experiences to our major. The Globe Series has turned out to be a very important tool for us, and we will pursue ways to fund this important program for our majors.

We do know we have many things to work on. For instance, we are continuing to discuss the point listed by the student above, who wished for the opportunity to do more individual creative work earlier in the students’ time at Westmont. Next year, we will be fully implementing a second-year assessment piece, which can include a variety of different projects, and should address the concern listed by this student.

Majors Interviews

The final assessment tool that will be discussed in this report is our Majors Interviews, instituted during the 2005-2006 school year. In this tool, departmental faculty members meet collectively, and conduct 15-20 minute interviews for all departmental majors at the end of each semester. The interviews are tailored to each individual student, and serve two main purposes: they give faculty members an opportunity to provide feedback relative to work accomplished in classes and performances; they provide a structured opportunity to provide encouragement and support for students who are doing exceptionally well – and critically – to students who are struggling for one reason or another. With every interview, the faculty provides response to student work, and notes are kept on each individual student. Students have opportunities to respond, ask questions, and provide explanations. In some cases they are “light” and informal, and in others they are more serious and direct.

This tool is an important one in our department. First of all, students are empowered by and through them: students feel they are “noticed,” that their work matters, and that faculty are concerned for their well-being and development. Faculty have found that the task of describing students’ work back to them invites the faculty to think of, reflect on, and treat students with a great deal of specificity and detail. In faculty discussions and reflections, we have found the personalized attention we offer students to be one of the distinctive characteristics of our department. We aim to maintain approximately 25-35 majors in our department so that the personalized, individually tailored programs we are developing with our students can continue to flourish.

The following capsule descriptions reflect the tone and nature of the Majors Interviews, including both faculty reflection and discussion related to each student’s growth, as well as student self-assessment in areas of both success and concern. All faculty members participated in these interviews, with notes kept by Assistant Professor Mitchell Thomas.

Student Number 1 (2nd year)

Student #1 has shown an extraordinary amount of improvement over the last year. It has been quite a thrill to watch him “catch fire” for the Theatre Arts department. He seems to be flourishing here, and has been directly or indirectly involved in nearly every project in
the department, as well as a large number of theatre classes. The student is a wonderful blend of performer and scholar. Physically, he is extremely adventurous and open, and is working toward the bringing together his vocal, physical, emotional, and imaginative worlds. Vocally he has the most difficulty, but has taken the voice and speech course, which has produced greater awareness of his particular challenges and given him a way to continue to improve. In the classroom, his writing has been described as “exemplary” and “insightful”. At this point, we are encouraging the student to continue his development as it relates to acting and directing, but to suggest that he may be a possible Ph. D. candidate with his particular ability to blend the conceptual and the practical.

In his own words (from an advanced acting essay): “On a purely physical level, I’ve learned a greater ease with my body, an increased confidence onstage, a freedom to be and move and create. I’ve learned to be spontaneous, to go with impulse, and to open myself up to the group and to the space. But the impact has been deeper that that, especially through the Saint Plays. I’ve learned to meld my faith with art, to make creation an act of prayer, an offering to God. Through the characters I play, I can get a better understanding of humanity in all its diversity, and thus a better understanding of myself. Acting this semester has expanded my physically, mentally, and spiritually, and I am very much looking forward to continuing the journey.”

Student Number 2 (3rd year)

Student Number 2 has had a very challenging year, dealing with personal loss as well as real confusion about her place in the department, and how to bring together her double major of art and theatre. Her work in various classes had been good, but there was a clear sense of not being able to bring her whole self to the work. In her final essay of advanced acting she wrote: “Starting out the semester, I entered the class with a terrible and unexplainable fear of the stage and was expecting failure. Through facing fear with God at my side I came to the conclusion that I would change my attitude towards acting…This class has been a turning point in my life.” She was involved with two different performances in our spring Fringe Festival, and commented that “her fire has been re-lit for theatre and art.” Through her work in class, as well as faculty and student created projects, we could clearly see the student come alive to her unique potential. She has a great spirit and is a selfless contributor. She is going to be designing a production as well as creating her own piece next year, and we are very excited to see how much work, and how much of her self, she will bring to the department next year.

Student #3: (4th year)

Student #3 is a double major in theatre and computer science, and has been struggling deeply in her journey. She has felt overwhelmed the last two years, and her work is suffering. Her punctuality has tapered off, and she has not been active in the department for quite some time. At our mid-year evaluations, she complained that “the structures are changing” and she felt that she was unable to cope with the shifting nature of her life. During the spring semester, she worked hard on getting a senior project short film off the ground, and made some good progress, but the project ultimately stalled. We are setting up specific deadlines and support channels for the student when she returns next semester.
in order to help her accomplish her project, as well as end her last semester on a high note with joy and lots of participation in the department projects.

**Majors Interviews – Closing the Loop**

The department’s mid-year and end-of-year interview practice is new for our department, and is one way that the department’s faculty responded to the request for different assessment strategies for program review. From our experience this year, it is clear that the interviews will become a vital component of our program. The entire faculty agrees that the interviews provide marvelous opportunities for faculty to process student work, and for students to explain and justify why a certain semester’s work looked as it did. These interviews provide material not always found in one-on-one faculty/student discussions, and a group of faculty members can offer varying perspectives and points of view, which are important for students, as well as other faculty as we wrestle with creating a complete “picture” of a student’s work.

Students enjoy the opportunity to have the undivided attention of the entire faculty, even if it is only for a 15-20 minute interview at the end of the semester. Students sign up for interview slots quickly, come on time, and appear to relish our questions and perspectives, even if some of our comments relate to particular struggles that a student had over the semester. Similarly, the faculty has found them immensely informative and illuminating. Many of us wish we could do them more often, but in a busy school year, with the number of productions and performances that our department produces, it is unrealistic. Nevertheless, the faculty now believes that the kinds of strategies discussed in this year-end review, including Senior Projects, Senior Interviews, and Mid-Year and End-of-Year Interviews, characterize our department, and underlines the department’s commitment to personal attention of the student, and developing tools that can further aid a student’s personal growth as they move through the various stages of the major. In faculty discussions we have suggested that we want to maintain the “intimacy” of our department – to keep a department of at most 25-35 majors – so that we can maintain the close personal work evidenced by the material found in this report. Without a doubt, the natures of these interviews will change over time, and we may find aspects of them that we want to refine and develop. However, it is clear to us that we have hit on a very important piece of assessment, and we will continue to use, refine, and develop it as we work with our students in the future.