Template for Departmental Assessment Plan  
Theatre Arts Department  
Westmont College  
January 16, 2004

A. Departmental Goals

Overview: The Theatre Arts Department at Westmont College seeks to occupy a crucial niche in Christian Liberal Arts education. Coupling innovative approaches to theatre practice with a thorough foundation in traditional perspectives, the department’s classes, projects, and performances teach students how to make original contemporary theatre, and provide the practical and methodological tools necessary for understanding how it relates to both past and present. In keeping with Westmont’s Liberal Arts vision and heritage, the department develops creative, imaginative individuals who are ready for a lifetime of thinking, learning, and creating. The Westmont Theatre Arts Department explores contemporary world theatre by exposing students to the work of artists and teachers who come from a variety of traditions, ethnicities, nationalities, cultures, and aesthetic training. By the end of a four-year period at Westmont College, a Theatre Arts major has gained the perspectives, knowledge, and creative methods necessary to make, interpret, and understand theatre in the contemporary world. With this in mind, the department has the following fundamental goals for its students.

1. Students display innovation, originality, and creativity in their theatre work, and possess a deep and broad understanding of the traditional heritage of world performing traditions.

The department’s students are necessarily Janus-faced – they can identify and/or use traditional methods of making and understanding theatre, while they can imagine and help develop future innovation in the field. The department uses numerous strategies to achieve these goals:

1  The department makes performances that achieve a high degree of uniqueness and originality. Students are consistently exposed to innovative, dynamic, and original productions on the college’s stage, through attendance at visiting productions, and through a yearly student New Works Festival.

2 Students learn from visiting international scholars who bring unique cultural experience and aesthetic methods to the department’s productions and classes.

3 Student work in the department’s performance classes, including acting, dance, design, directing, and choreography courses all include significant projects that encourage high levels of original conceptualization and execution. Most of
the department’s projects culminate in public performances, where assessment includes performing for a paying public; written critiques by the department’s faculty artists and students that will be electronically recorded and kept; reviews by area journalists; and video-recordings of all work developed by the department’s students. Beginning in the 2004-2005 school year, the critiques, reviews, and tape recordings will all be kept in a departmental archive.

Also beginning in the 2004-2005 school year, the department will begin a series of assessment pieces for 2nd and 4th year students. In the 2nd year, students will conceive, design, direct, and perform in a 7-minute piece based on a theme or motif of their choosing. In the 4th year, the students’ senior project will comprise of a 15-minute piece that they conceive, design, direct, and perform based on a theme or motif of their choosing. Students will be assessed relative to the originality, expressiveness, and completeness of the performance, judged by panel of the department’s faculty artists.

While innovation and originality are important characteristics of our students’ work, they must also possess an understanding of the tradition and heritage of theatre. The department uses numerous strategies to achieve these goals:

1. Students analyze classical plays of the western theatrical tradition where traditional approaches to language, behavior, and movement are employed.

2. Students display high levels of competence in realistic, Shakespearean, and other types of traditional theatre whereby students are assessed in the same ways as described in 1C above.

3. Students take dramatic literature courses in the English department, providing a balance of perspective, training, and opinion regarding ways to read, understand, and discuss drama.

2. **Students possess knowledge of diverse methods, approaches, and practices of the art of the stage.**

The department uses numerous strategies to achieve these goals:

1. Students display and express divergent methods, practices, and approaches due to teaching by visiting international scholars who teach classes, hold workshops, and develop productions with students. In this way, students inhabit the aesthetic methods used by artists from a range of ethnicities and cultural backgrounds.
2 Students display a range of styles and approaches: dance students perform in ballet, modern, and jazz styles; acting students perform in realistic, Shakespearean, comic, and highly physical styles; directing students successfully direct scenes from realistic plays, create interpretations for Shakespeare plays, and develop action from chance and arbitrary sources. Students are constantly assessed in the making of performances. In fact, it could be said that the creation and rehearsal process is a direct manifestation of assessment. Every moment that a rehearsal is stopped and a performer is asked to make an adjustment, try a new idea, attempt a new choice, speak more loudly, point her feet more, and so on, an act of assessment is achieved. Furthermore, assessment of this nature relates largely to the very physicality and corporeality of the art form. As professional teacher-artists work with our students, the students’ capabilities, modes of expressiveness, and flexibility of body and mind expand. By exposing students to different kinds of assessment relative to the art of the theatre (assessment for a play by Shakespeare will be different than a wordless piece of dance-theatre) students become pliable, flexible artists and individuals. We see evidence of this through a student’s command on stage, and how that command matures and develops through time, evidenced in the archival documentation of videotape, anecdotal evidence supplied by friends and family of the student, and commentary in reviews.

3 Student knowledge of the methods, approaches, and practices of theatrical representation are not limited solely to the performance dimension of our program. The Theatre Arts Department at Westmont is strongly oriented toward dramatic theory, dramatic literature, and theatre history. In these courses, students are assessed in ways traditional to the classroom – written examinations, essays, oral projects, group projects, and term papers. Hence, student assessment relative to Theatre Arts majors are focused on two general “sites” of a person’s being – a student’s intellectual or cognitive development, assessed in traditional ways through classroom work; and a student’s physical and kinaesthetic development, assessed through the incremental maturation of an artist that occurs in the laboratory of the acting or dance studio.

3. **Students have the ability to create their own original theatre work, and possess the appropriate theoretical and historical contexts necessary to understand its place in the cultural dynamics of the past and present.**

The department uses numerous strategies to achieve these goals:

1 Student projects in acting, dance, directing, and choreography focus on original work developed by students and mentored by faculty artists.
These projects are assessed by faculty critique and public performance. As indicated above, the department is commencing 2nd and 4th year assessment pieces whereby students create, produce, and present their own original theatre pieces. They will be assessed by a jury of faculty artists, and will have public presentations. Video recordings will be placed in the departmental archive.

2 Original student work does not occur in a vacuum, however. Students engage in a rigorous series in Theatre History and have opportunity to take a course in Dramatic Theory and Criticism that encourage students’ abilities to understand significant dramatic and theatrical movements; the major figures of the field and their respective contributions in acting, directing, design, playwriting, dramatic theory, and theatre architecture; and the relationship between the stage and the socio-political forces of periods in question. Assessment in these courses is largely through traditional means: written exams, essays, term papers, oral presentations, and portfolios.

B. College-wide Goals

1) Critical-Interdisciplinary Thinking Standard

The department’s students think deeply about the art of the stage, and develop abilities to apply the methodologies necessary for coherent discourse in theatre and drama studies. The departments’ students understand why the art form developed as it has, and can frame the appropriate questions necessary for further study and exploration. Furthermore, students in the department gain the ability to understand the relationship between theory and practice; can conceive of their own original work, and discuss its purpose and validity; can understand how departmental projects fit in a wider context of theatrical work and invention; and can discuss and elucidate intentions and effects of dramatic representation. The focus of the department, in many ways, relates to the “reading” of performance, and the development of the critical and theoretical spectacles necessary for that reading. The department uses numerous strategies to achieve these goals:

1 Students complete (beginning in 2005-2006) two core courses that deliver the essential critical foundations of the field. These courses focus on theoretical perspectives and invite students to think critically about the discipline. This area of study is continued in advanced classes whereby students explore different kinds and types of critical inquiry – from Aristotle to Phenomenology to New Historicism. Students are assessed through traditional means such as written exams and essays, but also through discussion, oral presentations, and Socratic dialogue. Critical-Interdisciplinary Thinking is also achieved in performance courses when students are required to keep journals and log books of their emerging thinking about the material in question. The journals and logbooks are
assessed through written and/or verbal means by the faculty member of the course.

2) Diversity Standard

The department’s students understand their place in a diverse world. Diversity is of critical importance to Westmont’s Theatre Arts Department. Students engage in cross-cultural experiences by participating in work directed or led by visiting professors or artists from other ethnicities and cultures. Students work directly with designers, choreographers, directors, and actors, and learn diverse methods and approaches by direct contact with artists from cultures unlike their own. In the immediate past, students have worked with an actor from Poland, a designer from the Czech Republic, and an actor from South Africa. Students work with professors and artists as an active and dynamic dimension of their theatrical education. From these experiences, students develop cross-cultural communication skills, flexibility, empathy, and awareness of the theatre’s value in that of other cultures. In addition, they learn new and different methods and approaches to the art of the stage, rooted in values relative to the cultures from which the visiting artists come.

Assessment is achieved in the give and take of the rehearsal hall or class meeting, in the constant development embodied in suggestion and adjustment. Furthermore, students are directly involved in classroom exercises, public performance, and projects that are assessed by the paying public and/or critique and discussion by audience members, faculty artists and other students. In these cases, students’ awareness of the role of theatre shifts and changes; their habits of mind are altered; and their methods of expression are heightened. When students work with artists from different countries student work is significantly transformed, evidenced by the very real artifact of theatrical performance, that is then video taped and maintained in the department archive. Finally, assessment is achieved anecdotally, when students identify what they have learned and experienced in post-performance discussions, or simply drop indications of their shifting attitudes in informal conversations.

3) Written and Oral Communication Standard

Students in the department possess skills necessary for effective written and oral communication. Students gain the ability to describe – through both speech and writing – their own, emerging thoughts and ideas relative to the art form, as well as the received historical, theoretical, and practical evolution of the art of the stage.

Students develop abilities to describe, evaluate, persuade, differentiate, analyze, and interpret in nearly every course in the curriculum, including traditional classroom courses such as Theatre History and performance-oriented courses such as acting. Assessment is achieved in a variety of
ways: performance reviews and analyses, journal keeping, research papers, dramatic analysis, oral presentations and speeches, and rehearsal and post-performance discussions. In addition, students display verbal effectiveness directly on the stage through the exploratory and repetitive processes caught up in the act of rehearsal. In acting classes and play rehearsal, students display verbal and emotional expressiveness, variety, power, clarity, and intention. In these courses and projects, assessment is achieved through public performance, classroom critique, and newspaper reviews. Performances are video taped and kept in the department archive.

4) **Christian Orientation Standard**

Students in the department display the important Student Learning Outcomes of Westmont’s Christian Orientation Standard. Students have numerous opportunities to explore their knowledge of the Christian faith, as well as its practices, affections, and virtues.

4 Students examine the ways in which Christianity and the study of theatre both challenge and inform one another, through an exploration of types and kinds of ritual experience, the character of sacred space, the themes of plays, and in comparisons between those themes and Biblical examples. Assessment is accomplished through classroom and/or rehearsal discussion and occasionally through essays and written examinations.

5 The practices, affections, and virtues of Christianity are practiced directly in the making of theatre and dance by and for the Westmont community. Students cultivate integrity, peacemaking, courage, self-control, faith, hope, and love in the ways that they work with one another in a rehearsal or studio setting. Students share devotionals before rehearsals or other classes, and make prayer an active element of each rehearsal experience. In this way, students model the meaningfulness of prayer, and its relationship to their work on stage, in the studio, or in the classroom. Assessment in this area is difficult to measure. Fostered by faculty leadership, the development of a group of Christians working on a play for a shared, mutually fulfilling goal, is one of the major purposes undertaken each time a play or dance is produced at Westmont. Though each ensemble of actors or dancers is different, the department seeks to create a responsible, accountable group that creates out of a need to express glory to God, and to pass on the innumerable gifts of Creation. Consequently, the achievement of these goals are assessed in intangible, but deeply felt ways – in the love evidenced between students and faculty, and in the unique bonds that are forged in the process of making a group, and performing as one, under the Lordship of Christ.
C. Structures for On-going Conversation

At present, the department has two ways to continue the assessment conversation. In the short-term, the department is actively engaged in overhauling our curriculum, so the assessment conversation will be an important part of our considerations in making a dynamic program that fulfills the college-wide standards and outcomes, and actualizes the department’s goals enumerated and explained here. Past the development of the new curriculum, the department will use two departmental meetings each semester to discuss emerging questions and perspectives regarding assessment. These conversations will be documented by a loyal departmental scribe.

D. Closing the Loop

At present, the department is vitally interested in developing and keeping the following kinds of data:

1) For each class, select 2 students who will provide the department with copies of all written, visual, and performance work undertaken during the students’ tenure at Westmont. This work will include examinations, term papers, design logbooks, and videotapes of original performances.

2) Develop an exit survey for all Theatre Arts majors that investigates student understanding of their own work, and their satisfaction with the department.

3) Develop Senior capstone course that will replace the present Senior Research Paper. This course will include a final comprehensive exam that will test the students’ comprehensive understanding of the field. The exam will be comprised of sections in Acting and Directing, Theatre History, Dramatic Theory, and Performance Studies.

From this material, the department will have particular data that will reveal the effectiveness of the program in achieving its goals.

E. Current Discussion Points

4) In the arts, much assessment appears related to subjective issues relative to taste, temperament, and artistic prejudice. In what ways can we systematize some kinds of assessment relative to aesthetic issues, so that the principles of assessment are more readily apparent to our students and ourselves?

5) The department is interdisciplinary in the sense that its houses both Theatre Arts and Dance programs. How can our assessment perspectives
become more integrated, and in what days do Theatre and Dance programs have discrete, individual assessment priorities that are not shared by both?