

2020-2021 Summary of Reading Imaginative Literature Assessment Results

Submitted by Paul Delaney, 8 March 2021

The Westmont College General Education (GE) category of Reading Imaginative Literature (RIL) was assessed during the 2019-2020 academic year. An indirect assessment was conducted by the GE Committee in Spring 2020 involving an audit of eight syllabi collected from the RIL courses offered that semester. Direct assessment was conducted in Fall 2019 by all faculty teaching RIL courses that semester. Some 139 students in eight courses (six English, one Spanish, one Theatre Arts) participated in the study. Data was disaggregated by gender, race, upper- and lower-division coursework, class year, and in one case by major. In August of 2019, faculty teaching RIL classes in Fall 2019 agreed on the following as Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) for the assessment:

RIL GE SLOs:

1. *Students will be able to distinguish among genres (or sub-genres) of imaginative literature by identifying the defining characteristics, authorial purposes, and thematic implications associated with various literary and dramatic forms.*
2. *Students will be able to analyze imaginative literature to indicate an understanding of language beyond its literal level by offering a close reading that demonstrates at the level of the individual sentence or line not just what the text means but how the text means what it means.*

The criteria under review were Comprehension, Recognition of Genre (“Genre”), Identification of the Implication of Language beyond Its Literal Level (“Figurative Language”), Analysis, and Thesis and Argumentation (“Argumentation”). Student work was categorized into four levels of accomplishment: 4—Highly Developed; 3—Developed; 2—Emerging; 1—Initial. A zero (0) was used for unacceptable work that fell below an Initial level of expectation.

Since the five categories under review were all evaluated on a 4-point scale, it may be helpful to think of the results as analogous to gpa’s. The best results were recorded in the category of Genre where students recorded an average criteria score of 3.04, which demonstrated a “developed” level of accomplishment. However, only half of the students participating in the study recorded scores in the Genre category because some faculty deemed the category irrelevant to their assessment for reasons discussed below. In other categories, student performance was tightly clustered from a 2.81 in Figurative Language to a 2.96 in Analysis. While there is certainly room for improvement in all of those scores, none of them raise a red flag, and any difference among categories in terms of level of performance seems modest.

When data was disaggregated by gender, women showed a higher level of attainment (3.0) than men (2.77) in the area of Comprehension. The attainment by men was modestly higher than that of women in the other four categories.

When data was disaggregated by race, white students showed a modestly higher level of attainment in all five categories compared to students of color: 2.99 to 2.90 in Comprehension, 3.18 to 3.03 in Genre, 2.96 to 2.71 in Figurative Language, 3.06 to 2.85 in Analysis, and 2.99 to 2.85 in Argumentation. Again, while those differences are measurable they do not seem statistically significant. It is worth noting that faculty in all three disciplines—Spanish, Theatre Arts, and English—have been moving toward revising the curriculum to be more actively anti-racist by

ensuring greater inclusion of under-represented voices. The data here reinforce the need to continue those efforts to serve more equitably the needs of all our students.

Although students who were assessed for Recognition of Genre scored gratifyingly high, several faculty opted out of assessing students in that category. There seemed to be a mismatch between the criterion and the assessment tool (a close reading of a brief passage of text) that we were using. Although a student explicating a sonnet might be expected to explain how closely it adhered or departed from the conventional expectations of a Shakespearean or a Petrarchan sonnet, a student completing a close reading of one page of a novel might find it irrelevant to expatiate on the characteristics of an epistolary, picaresque, or coming-of-age novel.

One unexpected result was that English majors performed less well than students majoring in other subjects. Only 10 English majors, all of whom were enrolled in English classes, were included in the study. In retrospect it seems that English faculty were less generous with scores than were colleagues in other departments. The six English RIL classes enrolled 27 students with declared majors in fields other than English. The two Spanish and Theatre Arts RIL courses enrolled 21 students with declared majors in fields other than English. Students with declared majors in fields other than English had an average criteria score of 2.74 in English classes compared to an average criteria score of 3.64 in Spanish and Theatre Arts classes. The same disparity held up for undeclared majors. The 55 undeclared majors in English classes had an average criteria score of 2.37 compared to a 3.51 for the 26 undeclared majors in Spanish and Theatre Arts courses. So the unexpectedly low marks for English majors may have had something to do with the fact that they were only being assessed in English classes.

Given the decision to simplify scoring procedures by having each professor score his or her own students, no norming sessions were conducted to ensure that all profs were on the same page. That results in it being difficult to know if our results are comparing apples with apples. Such disparities seem especially pronounced between English and the other two disciplines. The committee agreed on two recommendations for the future. When the RIL category next comes up for assessment, it would be helpful to have sample essays that demonstrate each of the levels of attainment. Secondly, it would be helpful to have norming sessions to help ensure that professors doing the assessments were applying criteria in roughly similar ways. A third option to consider would be having more than one assessor weigh in on each student's work. That would multiply the workload because a professor would not just be marking his or her own students but also those of a colleague.

Until such time as norming sessions can be held to ensure that we are comparing apples with apples across disciplinary lines, we recommend establishing a benchmark that 50% of all students would achieve Highly Developed or Developed levels of attainment.

Given the modest disparity between the levels of attainment shown by students of color and white students, we recommend that faculty continue their efforts to make the curriculum more anti-racist by ensuring the inclusion of more diverse voices in our RIL courses in order to serve more equitably the needs of all our students.

Given the fact that Recognition of Genre was waived by a number of faculty in the assessment of close reading essays, we recommend that the next assessment of the Reading Imaginative Literature category should use a couple of different assessment tools. Perhaps a close reading essay could be supplemented by a quiz regarding the distinctives of genre.