LITERARY STUDY, MEASUREMENT, AND THE SUBLIME: DISCIPLINARY ASSESSMENT

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With the assistance of
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The Teagle Foundation

For Bob Connor, an extraordinary leader for the humanities and for liberal education.

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FOREWORD

THE TEAGLE FOUNDATION HAS AN active program of communication, reflecting its mission to share the knowledge that arises from its work and the experiences of its grantees. The Foundation's website is an important part of the effort to disseminate ideas and practices and includes a wide variety of reports, opinion pieces, and essays by Teagle staff members, grantees, and leaders in higher education. For the first time, a full-length book is appearing as an original publication on the Teagle website. This collection of essays, *Literary Study, Measurement, and the Sublime: Disciplinary Assessment*, edited by Donna Heiland and Laura J. Rosenthal, represents an important new venture in the Foundation's communication program (it will appear in print as well, so that readers can engage with it in the format they prefer). The book is the product of many authors, including the editors, both of whom have written essays for it. But it is the creativity and the persistence of the editors that explains the appearance of this new publication. The editors have reviewed the essays rigorously, to ensure that they meet the highest academic standards.

The essays represent an enticing and interesting series of ideas and experiences about the work of assessment in literature and related fields that often resist the language and the methods of standard forms of assessment—often, one might add, for very good reasons. Yet it is just the play of ideas and interpretations that one finds in literary studies that highlights the collection. The opinions of various authors about the uses and the abuses of assessment cover a wide spectrum of views that reflect the perspectives that the Foundation finds in its own work with its grantees. This is to be expected and even welcomed, for little learning occurs if answers are easy or consensus is artificial. In publishing this work, Donna Heiland and Laura Rosenthal have contributed significantly to an understanding of the range and the possibilities of assessment, and to the work of the Foundation.

Richard L. Morrill
President, The Teagle Foundation

INTRODUCTION

DONNA HEILAND AND LAURA J. ROSENTHAL

ASSESSMENT IS CURRENTLY RESHAPING the academic landscape. In a recent survey of over fifty English department chairs and graduate directors conducted in anticipation of the 2010 meeting of the Association of Department Chairs (ADE) East, 86% reported that their department was engaged in some form of learning outcomes assessment ("ADE Survey"). While this high percentage may not necessarily obtain throughout all English and foreign language departments, only two percent of those who responded reported that they were neither engaged in assessment projects nor had plans to set one in motion. Of course, this simple statistic represents a wide range of practices. Inevitably, some departments are spending most of their energy trying to figure out ways to generate just enough information to satisfy the demands of accountability; at the other end of the spectrum, some departments are seeing ways to use assessment to rethink student learning in their programs. Most fall somewhere in between. Faculty responses at most institutions inevitably vary as well: some instructors have embraced assessment, some are cautiously exploring its possibilities, and others have vehemently protested its institutionalization. Yet, it has begun to reach a saturation point in academic culture. Even Facebook now offers as one of its "Shite Gifts for Academics" an "Overly-Enthusiastic Assessment Guru," presumably of the kind that no one wants to see at the next department meeting. Love or hate it, learning outcomes assessment is becoming an important part of academic life in English and foreign language departments.

While assessment has become an occupational reality (and, some might say, an occupational hazard), in many professional venues for literary and cultural studies there has been relatively little discussion about this process and its implications. While professional issues are regularly and vigorously debated at conferences and in journals, discussions of assessment tend to be relegated to more administrative venues and treated as practical matters.[1] These discussions take place in meetings of campus committees, in departments, and in informal settings (by this point most instructors have probably opined about assessment around the proverbial water cooler), but often do not move much beyond these contexts. While most departments, then, are conducting assessment projects, and while many faculty members currently participate in those

projects, *and* while many instructors have strong opinions about assessment, few of the questions raised by assessment have attracted the kind of sustained thought that we give to other aspects of professional life. This collection of essays attempts to end this silence, asking first of all: if assessment has become so pervasive in professional academic life, then how do we account for the limits of the discussion that has so far taken place in our own disciplinary context?

This cannot be simply because outcomes assessment is not a literary topic, like Shakespeare or the Harlem Renaissance, as many topics of broader professional interest have attracted attention in recent years. We see publications and conference panels on academic freedom, the exploitation of adjunct instructors, the tenure system, the politics of the classroom, university budgets, graduate student mentoring, and faculty self-governance. As conditions in higher education change, it often feels like these discussions have become what theory was in the 1980s: the problems in which everyone has a stake and that in certain ways generate the most interesting fundamental discussions. Nor does any lack of interest in teaching or classroom issues among literary scholars explain the under-theorizing of assessment. Our primary professional organization, the Modern Language Association (MLA), publishes a series of books devoted to teaching strategies ("Approaches to Teaching"), and prominent scholars have published monographs on the teaching of literature (Graff, Showalter, Tompkins). Most professional organizations devoted to the academic sub-fields in literary study dedicate conference panels to teaching practices and some offer prizes for course designs. Every job applicant generates a teaching philosophy and must sometimes even show pedagogy in action by teaching a sample class on the campus visit. Further, few topics in literary studies have attracted greater attention in the general public than what kinds of texts get taught. Newspapers and novelists have dissected conflicts over the literary canon; careers have been made and lost in their wake.

No one can reasonably argue, then, that we overlook teaching as an object of scholarly and critical attention. Those who teach literature have a significant investment in classroom practice and outcomes; the general public joins us in significant concern over the choice of works to explore. In spite of this intense interest in what we teach and even how we teach it, however, until very recently, there has been less interest in the overall effectiveness of our efforts. We are more likely to discuss how we choose our texts than how we know whether or not we have achieved any of our teaching goals, be they conservative, radical, or in between. Outcomes assessment would seem to be an obvious partner and resource for our work, and yet it often appears to many faculty members as fundamentally disconnected from the daily challenges of teaching and learning. Indeed, for many instructors in higher education, the most interesting question raised by outcomes assessment has been how to avoid getting stuck with it. Why?

We propose a three-part answer: 1) assessment has been identified with government mandated accountability measures about which faculty and administrators have a range of reservations; 2) even when assessment is understood in more progressive terms as a means of improving student learning, it

has not been seen as a viable way of furthering the elusive and even ineffable heart of what goes on in literature classrooms; and 3) the best-known assessment efforts have targeted overall institutional performance and general education outcomes rather than the concerns and outcomes of specific disciplines. In what follows, we take up these issues.

Assessment for Accountability vs. Assessment for Learning

The current landscape for assessment in the United States takes its contours from the assessment movement that has developed over the last three decades, and even a cursory glance at this history suggests how constant the central debates of that movement have been. There has been forward movement in the field, to be sure, as—for example—increasingly sophisticated assessment instruments have been developed in response to increasingly sophisticated understandings of student learning and organizational development (Ewell, "To Capture"). Since its inception, however, the field has been bedeviled by tensions between assessment conducted for the purposes of accountability and assessment conducted for the purposes of improving teaching and learning (Ewell, "Emerging Scholarship" 9).

Peter Ewell, who has been described as the "dean of the outcomes assessment movement in higher education" (Banta, *Building a Scholarship* 1), is also its premier—and, so far, its only—historian. Ewell has charted and reflected on the movement's history in a series of essays ("To Capture," "Emerging Scholarship," "Perpetual Movement"), tracing its roots to research and practice in four major areas that have all had an impact on the work of assessment: on student learning (a research history we'll come back to); on student retention; on "the rise of program evaluation" and the development of "scientific management" approaches to education; and on the development of the "mastery and competency-based learning movement," which is behind current assessment methods that focus on "evaluating student portfolios and other authentic evidence of student attainment." The first of these bodies of work begins as early as the 1930s, and the others all emerging in the 1960s and later ("Emerging Scholarship" 4-6).

While it has deep roots, then, the assessment movement picked up noticeable momentum in the mid-1980s. Ewell dates "the birth of the assessment movement" to the "First National Conference on Assessment in Higher Education, held in Columbia, South Carolina, in the fall of 1985" ("Emerging Scholarship" 7) and his choice of a conference as a key moment in the movement's history is telling. For Ewell (and for us) assessment is a dynamic and inherently collaborative activity, and the work of assessment proceeds most effectively when it is draws on the community of those who have a stake in improving student learning. Feeding into and out from that meeting were a series of reports written from two major perspectives. On the one hand were those speaking on behalf of the academy (from, for example, the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in Higher Education, the Association of American Colleges, and the National Endowment for Humanities) and calling for the development of more "coherent" curricula, more pedagogical strategies

that sought to improve student achievement through "active learning" and "prompt and useful feedback," and assessment of all of these efforts. On the other hand came "state-based calls for greater accountability," from, for example, the National Governor's Association ("Emerging Scholarship" 7-8).[2]

The tension between academic voices calling for educational reform on the one hand and government voices calling for accountability on the other continues to be manifested in every aspect of assessment work, from its motivation through its implementation to its use. That said, this tension is often not clearly understood. Thus, as Ewell also points out, the very word "assessment" can lead to confusion, as people use this blanket term to mean very different things: an effort to measure "an individual's mastery of complex abilities," or an effort "to benchmark school and district performance in the name of accountability," or even "a special kind of program evaluation, whose purpose was to gather evidence to improve curricula and pedagogy" ("Emerging Scholarship" 9). Tensions and ambiguities notwithstanding, the assessment movement has persisted, and while the two fundamental lines of work—assessment for accountability and (to use Peggy Maki's phrase) assessment for learning—have developed considerably over the last twenty-five years or so, both also still draw considerable critical commentary.

On the accountability side, the reception of assessment has been shaped by some arguably unfortunate associations: many at first assumed it was, at best, a passing trend that would go away on its own (like the "sub-plot within assessment" that was Total Quality Management ["Perpetual Movement" 2]), and at worst an extension of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Given that enthusiasm for accountability has only increased in the Obama administration, as evidenced by the appointment of Arne Duncan as Secretary of Education and his accountability-oriented policies, the historical link of outcomes assessment to the Bush-era NCLB seems unshakable. Real as that connection may be, however, it is also—as we will later argue—limited in both its explanatory and evaluative power. Nevertheless, during the Bush administration, accrediting organizations stepped up requirements for outcomes assessment in response to the 2006 report of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, written under the authority of then-Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. "A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education" (United States Dept. of Education)—or the Spellings Report, as it has come to be called—argued that universities have not been sufficiently accountable to their federal funding agencies and other stakeholders (parents, taxpayers, future employers), particularly in the areas of student learning and access.[3] Thus outcomes assessment came to many institutions as a top-down demand for accountability that shared its timing, its administrative origin, and apparently also its ideological impulse, with the notorious NCLB initiative.

Outcomes assessment as practiced in higher education, however, has clear differences from NCLB: unlike NCLB, accrediting agencies have not mandated standardized tests; they have for the most part allowed institutions to develop their own processes. There is no "failing school" designation of the sort

that has proven so unproductive with NCLB.[4] The accountability movement in higher education is not even the result of a federal mandate: accrediting agencies are not governmental bodies like the Department of Education, but rather private agencies funded by the institutions they serve. That said, the accrediting agencies have been influenced by federal agencies and state governments, as mentioned earlier, and showed interest in assessment results long before the Spellings Commission produced its report. Thus assessment has registered with many faculty members as a potentially reductive accountability effort that will replicate the problems associated with NCLB, and this perception has to a high degree shaped its reception on college and university campuses. These negative associations, combined with the fact that faculty members often experience assessment as an unsupported and unsustainable addition to their workload (the phrase "unfunded mandate" will inevitably come up), an intrusion into painstakingly developed pedagogical strategies, or even a violation of academic freedom, mean that it has not struck most instructors as an intellectually promising avenue.

Skepticism about assessment for accountability has been matched to some degree by skepticism about—or perhaps more accurately, lack of interest in or even familiarity with—assessment for learning. As mentioned earlier, Ewell calls attention to a long line of research focused on generating information that can shape efforts to improve student learning (rather than hold institutions accountable) ("Emerging Scholarship"). Indeed, inquiries into student learning in the fields of educational and developmental psychology from the 1930s through the 1970s produced "basic taxonomies of outcomes, models of student growth and development, and tools for research like cognitive examinations, longitudinal and cross-sectional surveys, and quasi-experimental designs," all with the goal of the improvement of learning ("Emerging Scholarship" 4). This research seems to be less well-known than the accountability-focused work mentioned above, and in the field of literary study, even books devoted to teaching generally fail to mine this rich resource.

Education sociologist Steven Brint argues that the progressive agenda for teaching and learning has been carried forward by the ongoing efforts of organizations such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (along with the foundations that have supported them). Brint also notes, however, that—while the teaching reform movement has advocated "active learning experiences, commitment to diversity and civic engagement" alongside "challenging academic standards"—it has ultimately proven, in his view, "no match for the consumerism and utilitarianism of college student life" (4). Whatever the reason, our experiences have tended to confirm Brint's observation that commitments to assessment for learning and the information that such projects have produced tend to be overlooked in discussions of assessment.

Many researchers actively involved in studying student learning today are consciously trying to retain the idealism of the reform movement and its focus on student learning, even as they look for ways to help institutions meet the

demands of accountability. This convergence of agendas has been increasingly evident in a range of major studies and initiatives. For example:

- the Wabash National Study, which began as "a large-scale, longitudinal study to investigate critical factors that affect the outcomes of a liberal arts education" (Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts, "Wabash National Study 2006-2009 Overview") now focuses particularly on helping "institutions to use evidence to identify an area of student learning or experience that they wish to improve, and then to create, implement, and assess changes designed to improve those areas" (Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts, "Wabash Study 2010").
- the National Survey of Student Engagement runs an Institute for Effective Practice, which aims "to draw upon current and future research initiatives to help faculty, administrators, and governing board members effectively link information about student experiences to efforts to improve academic programs and support services" (NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice);
- the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) helps individuals and institutions use assessment data in their ongoing work and as the foundation for a series of summer institutes: one on "campus decision making" (among other things), another on "problem solving using assessment to improve diverse learning environments," and still another on "statistical methods that will enhance critical research," "identify social and institutional inequities," and "frame and design studies that … support social justice and policy change" (DeAngelo);
- CLA in the Classroom, a very successful spin-off of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), which uses "performance tasks" to assess students' higher order thinking skills (Performance tasks provide students with materials to solve real-world problems.) (CLA in the Classroom);
- AAC&U Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) project begins with the premise that "to achieve a high-quality education for all students, valid assessment data are needed to guide planning, teaching, and improvement" (AAC&U).

Even with the best of intentions and with an emphasis on the benefits to learning (while fulfilling the demands of accountability as well), assessment projects still pose multiple challenges. To reach the point of using evidence to improve student learning, we have to be convinced that the evidence at hand is measuring what we want it to measure, and here, perhaps, is the real issue for many faculty members: can we measure the learning outcomes that we value the most? This question points to one of the most enduring critiques of assessment, and it focuses on an issue that arguably pertains to many disciplines even as it seems to have special relevance to the field of literary study: what Peter Ewell has labeled the "ineffability debate" ("Emerging Scholarship").

In its most extreme formulation, the "ineffability debate" questions "the extent to which educational outcomes can be specified and measured at all" ("Emerging Scholarship" 17-18). Critics have wondered whether "*any* attempt to look at outcomes directly was both demeaning and doomed to failure," even as they have been put off by the fact that "assessment's principal vocabulary appeared confined to education and the social sciences," and have "characterized as 'positivist' and excessively mechanistic" both "the rhetoric and the implied methods advanced by the assessment movement" ("Emerging Scholarship" 17). Ewell astutely observes that

> this classic complex of faculty reservations about assessment reveals some quite different underlying issues. Some are legitimately methodological, including appropriate reservations about the ability of off-the-shelf instruments and forced-choice methods to fully reflect collegiate learning, or fears about "teaching to the test." Some are profoundly philosophical, based on a recognition that deep learning is always holistic, reflective, and socially constructed. Still others are predominantly political, derived from faculty fears about loss of autonomy and creeping management control, as well as concerns about external intrusion into the curriculum. (17)

For Ewell, the debate itself "has proven helpful in deepening assessment scholarship." It has "forced practitioners to sharpen the philosophical grounding of the movement—rooting it in the tenets of scholarship and the process of teaching and learning," has "reemphasized that the evidence used by assessment must always rest upon a peer-based community of judgment," and has "forced explicit recognition of the fact that evidence is consistently constrained by the context in which it is generated" ("Emerging Scholarship" 18).

Ewell concludes that "[e]pistemological issues of this kind thus remain at the heart of the movement and remain healthily and vigorously contested" ("Emerging Scholarship" 18), and he is right. This collection of essays attests to the centrality of the "ineffability debate" in discussions of assessment, and if this collection can engage that debate and move it forward—looking especially at its relevance for the discipline of literary study—it will have accomplished one of its central aims. Certainly assessment raises a host of theoretical and practical issues for all faculty, ranging from the concerns about accountability discussed above, through questions about how to balance already overburdened schedules and make strategic use of precious resources, to worries about the legitimacy of the work, the seeming redundancy of the data (after all, professors gives grades already), and the potential for inappropriate use of outcomes results in promotion reviews or in other ways. But again, for those who teach *literature*, the most common problem seems to be the challenge of measurement itself. Many teaching in literature programs feel that while the mastery of calculus, for example, can be measured with an exam, learning in literary studies has an ineffable quality. A few peripheral

skills, the argument goes, might be measurable. We could probably figure out, for example, how many students understand proper citation or verb agreement, but doesn't measuring these skills reduce the field of literature and culture to instrumentality? Further, if we concentrate on measuring only what we think can be measured, we will leave behind the parts of the discipline that we find most truly valuable. Great teachers introduce their students to texts whose meanings are so many and so subtle, whose forms are so complex and irreducible, that any effort to codify the experience of reading and interpreting them seems to promise inevitable reduction. How can we measure the outcomes of such efforts, or even fully understand the efforts themselves? Contributors to this collection engage this and related questions from a variety of perspectives.

The Need for Discipline-Based Assessment

Returning to our opening question about why teachers of literature have been relatively reluctant to engage assessment as an intellectual and professional issue, we want to suggest one additional and less recognized factor: the importance of grounding learning outcomes assessment in the disciplines. While sophisticated assessment projects generate a great deal of evidence about students and what they are learning, less cross-fertilization than one would expect has taken place between assessment for learning and efforts to define and achieve disciplinary goals. We suspect that this is in good part because so much research into student learning applies to institution-wide rather than disciplinary concerns, something that limits faculty investments and ownership of the process.[5] Nationally normed instruments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement, the Collegiate Learning Assessment, and Your First College Year, to name just three, provide various kinds of valuable data that can help faculty and administrators understand where their policies and practices can be more effective in improving student learning overall. Nevertheless, teaching and learning also raise discipline-specific problems and possibilities that these instruments cannot address, and it is our contention that assessment that does not take disciplinarity into consideration will inevitably run up against certain limits.

Probably most of you inspired to read this volume agree: in the ADE survey cited earlier, 78% of respondents felt that assessing a literature program raises particular issues not faced by assessment in other disciplines ("ADE Survey"). In pointing this out, we are not trying to make the case that literary study is exceptional, but rather that disciplinary focus is crucial in higher education; we imagine that responses would be similar in the history department and in the math department. While instructors in higher education often share some broad goals for their students, the subject matter itself nevertheless demands different strategies for thinking about learning. Further, the more general and sometimes generic assessment practices, we fear, can end up discouraging broadly based faculty participation.[6] If assessment strategies seem alien to disciplinary cultures, and if assessment practice itself comes across as a distinct field with its own aims and standards, then faculty are more likely to

continue to understand assessment as a process done to them from the outside rather than emerging from within disciplinary practice. Thinking about assessment as its own distinct field, unembedded in disciplinary practice, can defeat the purpose in several ways: at one extreme, it can tempt institutions to simply hire professionals to take care of an annoying accountability problem, or worse, it can impose goals and methods that faculty don't understand as aligned with the purpose of their discipline. It can alienate the people most crucial to the process: the faculty. While we have much to learn, then, from scholars who have developed assessment strategies and considered their stakes, we also want to maintain the importance of disciplinary distinctiveness.

Over time, we hope that new strategies for assessment will emerge that take into account disciplinary differences and, ideally, that use the tools of the disciplines themselves to engage assessment projects. Discipline-specific assessment methods and strategies certainly exist or are being developed across a number of fields: the National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) currently posts resources for nineteen disciplines on its website. The different concerns that can drive assessment in the disciplines have also been subjects of study. Trudy Banta's *Assessing Student Learning in the Disciplines* gathers together essays that explore questions of disciplinary assessment from multiple perspectives: what it means to assess disciplinary learning from the perspectives of faculty development and student learning; what is involved in assessing learning in disciplines subject to accreditation (such as nursing) and those not subject to accreditation (history and urban studies are both discussed); what is at stake in using "standardized tests in assessing learning in the major" (for example, the Educational Testing Service's Major Field Tests) which—she notes—"cannot cover all the aspects of college students' learning in a given major," but "must be supplemented by other measures designed or selected by departmental faculty" (5-6). There is also very good work being done to link disciplinary learning to the broader goals of liberal education.[7] That said, there is much yet to do.

In this rudimentary foray, we have concentrated on the stakes more than the strategies, as this seems to us to be the more urgent question. Essays in this volume certainly offer practical advice and explore some models of assessment projects, but for the most part, contributors here concentrate on the intellectual and political meanings, possibilities, and limitations that emerge at the contentious crossroads of outcomes assessment and literary study. We aim to open up a two-way street: in one direction, educators need to develop assessment strategies that reflect their own thinking about the purpose of their discipline. In the other direction, and as we hope will be in evidence in this volume, we can also use disciplinary strategies to think about the project of assessment itself and its place in higher education. We hope that faculty members come to see themselves not as passive executors (or resistors) of assessment directives, but rather as critical thinkers in shaping student learning on one side and assessment strategies and policies on the other.

The Essays

In keeping with our hypothesis that the tools of the discipline are the best ones to exploit in assessing the learning intended to take place, we have focused on the literary figuration of the sublime, which is above all a way of trying to understand the ineffable, as a way of grounding this collection of essays. We want to know whether there really is a genuinely inarticulable and so unmeasurable set of learning outcomes associated with literary study and we want to understand more fully the satisfaction, challenges, curious possibilities, frustrations, and sometimes outrages that various faculty members have experienced in the advent of assessment on their campuses. Our contributors are generally not assessment "experts," but rather reflective practitioners and insightful theorists who have brought their considerable critical skills to bear on the looming questions that assessment raises. These essays address good experiences and bad ones; our authors include assessment enthusiasts, assessment skeptics, and many somewhere in between.

The collection opens with a series of four essays that think broadly as well as deeply about undergraduate student learning: about the goals of an undergraduate education, the value of disciplinary learning and especially literary study within the framework of that education, and the importance of knowing both how to assess what students are learning and then—on the basis of that evidence—how to intervene to bring their learning to a still higher level. Carol Geary Schneider frames the large questions of the discussion, considering what it means to offer students a liberal education—that is, an education focused on the development of broad cognitive and personal capacities, with grounding in disciplinary learning—in a society committed to the education of all of its citizens. She speaks in part from her position as president of a national organization devoted to precisely this form of education to insist on the feasibility and, indeed, the necessity of defining even seemingly elusive goals clearly, finding ways to help students achieve them, and relying on evidence to attest to the work one has accomplished as well as what remains to be done. Against that strong national call Schneider positions the personal story that also grounds her argument and her work on the national scene. Rachelle L. Brooks moves directly into a discussion of how one might go about assessing the kind of learning Schneider discusses, arguing for the importance of attending not only to general education goals and outcomes, but to disciplinary learning as well. Her distinction between what she calls the assessment *of* a discipline's distinct learning outcomes and assessment *within* a discipline to determine how it contributes to the overall outcomes of a college education is especially valuable to those of us trying to do this work. Rosemary G. Feal, David Laurence, and Stephen Olsen report on the efforts of the Modern Language Association—the primary professional association for many teachers of literature—to engage with questions around the definition and assessment of student learning. And in the final essay of this section, Michael Holquist offers a rich context for current discussions of assessment, which he situates in relation to the history of universities as they have developed both in Europe and North America. His argument pays particular attention to Immanuel

Kant's understanding of the university as a place that seeks to develop in students a capacity for "critical judgment" or "criticism," even as it moves on to a deeply felt and powerfully articulated argument against the forms of standardized assessment that he sees taking root abroad and, he fears, in the United States as well.

From this opening set of essays, the collection moves to a second set that confronts questions of the ineffable head on, using the tools of literary study—and especially concepts of the sublime, which (again) we understand as efforts to theorize "ineffability"—to think through both the kind of learning that characterizes literary study and how we might gain evidence of its accomplishment. W. Robert Connor grounds this set of inquiries with a study of Longinus' seminal treatise on the sublime, reading it as an "educational theory" in which the sublime emerges as a technology that "has profoundly enriching and liberating effects on the individual" and that—far from being ineffable—can in fact be "recognized and analyzed" (97). Donna Heiland advances a related argument, bringing the psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow" together with eighteenth-century thinking about the sublime to argue for the possibility of constructing classroom experiences that engage students intensely, and that, at their best, create the conditions in which students come to those moments of insight, the "aha" moments, that can seem so elusive in their workings. Sarah Webster Goodwin engages questions akin to Heiland's but by another route, calling for the use of "our discipline's most complex hermeneutics" (134)—its thinking about the sublime and related questions—to assess students' capacity for pathbreaking intellectual work, and arguing for the value of rubrics as "not a constraint but instead … a means of liberation" in achieving this end (135). Lucinda Cole adds a valuable perspective to these essays' discussions of sublimity and creativity when she makes a case for reclaiming the aesthetic—and within that frame, creativity—as a specific value in literary study, and for understanding creativity not as an individual talent but as a capacity cultivated by a socio-cultural system. Charles Altieri makes an equally strong case for the value of the aesthetic in both literature and literary study, but from a different angle. Focusing our attention on the particular values of the work of art and what it takes—and means—to appreciate that particularity, he demonstrates his point with a finely nuanced reading of two key lines in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra.* And while he does not dismiss the possibility of developing a mode of assessment adequate to the complexity of such critical reading, he argues that we would do better to use available resources for the support of small classes that could effectively foster the development of such reading practices, rather than diverting them to a distinct effort of assessment.

The third group of essays come together around questions of "Politics, Institutions, and Disciplinary Goals." Laura J. Rosenthal argues that outcomes assessment, in spite of its complications and limitations, might actually benefit not just students but the discipline of literary study itself, which has come under attack from both the left and the right for its lack of a

clearly articulated purpose. She places the call to assess in the context of other considerable pressures on literary study in higher education and argues that assessment could become a form of advocacy by concentrating attention on our primary interface with the public: the classroom. Charles M. Tung proposes a new strategy for reading practice in response to the "coroner's report" (199) that keeps getting written for literature departments. He too argues that the classroom is the place to rethink the discipline. Negotiating between calls for "distant reading" (199) and a return to poetics, Tung explores the advantages of what he calls "thick reading built on the curricularized classroom" (207). "Although the "S" word has become virtually synonymous among academics with pedagogical sterility," write Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, "we want to make a progressive case for educational standardization by pointing out its unappreciated democratic potential" (217). Graff and Birkenstein go on to reveal the limits of the anti-standardization argument and suggest serious, although not uncritical, attention to the findings of the "Spellings Report." In a wide-ranging and ambitious essay, David Mazella integrates his own experience launching the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Houston with both assessment and broader issues of institutional organization. Mazella shows the indispensable value of "double-loop learning" at every level, from the day-to-day work of learning to institutional organization itself. He sees a vigorous engagement with the challenge of assessment as the best way to avoid some of the current challenges to institutional autonomy.

The fourth group consists of "Case Studies and Templates." In their essay "From Skepticism to Measured Enthusiasm," Kirsten T. Saxton and Ajuan Maria Mance chart their "shifting attitudes as English professors, from trepidation to measured enthusiasm, for the value of assessment in our field of literary study" (259). Saxton describes the challenging process of revising her department's "Introduction to Literature" course upon the painful (but possibly familiar) recognition that students could take more than one section without recognizing that they were taking the same course. In the second half of the essay, Ajuan Maria Mance reflects on the ways in which assessment practices could help insure that an institutional commitment to diversity gets translated into the personal and intellectual transformation of students. Pat Belanoff and Tina Good offer a disturbing and cautionary tale in their efforts to prioritize assessment for student learning over increasingly bureaucratic forms of accountability. In this vivid account, Belanoff and Good emphasize the tremendous stakes involved and the urgent need for both individual and collective action on the part of faculty members. Jenny Bergeron and Russell A. Berman argue for the centrality of "critical reading" of literary texts in a foreign language to undergraduate education in the liberal arts, noting its value for cultivating not only students' language skills, but also their capacity for sophisticated textual analysis, "cross-cultural hermeneutics," and overall "intellectual maturity" (310). Noting that most curricula in this area are less focused on what students really need to develop this skill, they suggest ways to rethink what is taught,

why it is taught, and how it is assessed. In an essay that focuses specifically on the question of how language learning (in this case, Spanish) and the skills demanded in literature courses relate to each other, José Ricardo-Osorio makes the case that assessment can help us understand the continuity between those two kinds of learning. Finally, Barbara E. Walvoord—who has written and consulted widely on assessment issues—considers the challenge of devising an assessment strategy particular to literature courses and departments. She offers a lucid, step-by-step guide to devising an increasingly specific rubric that captures key learning goals in a literature course.

The essays in this volume, then, range widely in their views and approaches to the project of assessment as it relates to literary study; nevertheless, they consistently combine theoretical insight and practical wisdom. There will be more to say on this subject, we are sure, and looking beyond our own field, we hope that scholars and teachers in other disciplines will further deepen our understanding of what is at stake in the work of assessment, too, by taking on this issue in the context of their own teaching and research.

NOTES

[1] Ewell makes a similar observation when he comments on "widespread perceptions of assessment as an 'administrative' rather than an academic pursuit" ("Perpetual Movement" 3).

[2] The Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education's *Involvement in Learning* came out in 1984 (United States Natl. Inst. of Education); The Association of American College's *Integrity in the College Curriculum* appeared in 1985; William J. Bennett's *To Reclaim a Legacy* appeared in 1984, published by the National Endowment for the Humanities (of which Bennett was then Chair); and the National Governors' Association's *Time for Results* appeared in 1986 ("Emerging Scholarship" 7-8).

[3] The full text of the report is available on the United States' Department of Education website.

[4] The full text of NCLB, which passed in 2002, is available on the US Department of Education website. For an example of the kind of debate inspired by the "failing schools" designation, see Schemo.

[5] It is instructive to know that—in the 1980s / 1990s, when assessment methods first began to shift to "naturalistic" assessment modes that took advantage of what institutions and individuals already did, and to "curriculum-embedded techniques" in particular—these efforts "first took place in the major field, where clear course progressions often existed and where faculty were better able to identify appropriate opportunities" ("To Capture" 106). These included using such existing assessment modes as exams, "capstone experience[s] (e.g., a senior seminar, project, internship, or field placement)" or even less obtrusive assessment mechanisms, such as reviewing "syllabi and required exercises, together with

sample student products at different stages to roughly determine curricular goal achievement" (106). Assessment of general education outcomes—which now dominate the national discussion—followed more slowly down this path (104).

6   Wright makes this point as well, noting: "Current [assessment] offerings are overwhelmingly generic—that is, they do not speak specifically to the interests of a faculty member in sociology or geology, in art history or business. Yet the discipline is where a faculty member lives, literally and metaphorically. It is the discipline to which faculty members devote a lifetimes of scholarship. It is love for and expertise in the discipline that they hope to cultivate in their students" (7).

7   See Brooks' essay in this volume, which discusses efforts to assess broad liberal learning outcomes as they are achieved in the disciplines of classics and political science. The American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology has also done work that is relevant here, exploring the extent to which the Society's disciplinary learning goals map onto AAC&U's liberal learning goals.

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Assessment, Liberal Education, and Literary Study

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING—MINE AND THEIRS
CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER

THIS VOLUME OF ESSAYS ENGAGES two broad national dialogues, one concerned with assessment and its relation to learning, and a second concerned with the future of the liberal arts in general and the humanities in particular. After many years of working with both these issues, I am persuaded that progress on each will depend on a fundamental recasting of our most basic organizing assumptions about what actually counts as liberal learning. We need new frameworks to characterize the main goals of a twenty-first-century liberal education[1]—both to guide students in achieving a liberal and liberating education, and also, crucially, to develop meaningful assessments that speak to our most important educational goals.

In the passages that follow, I share the personal history that shaped my views on transformative liberal education: what it entails and how we can foster it for a far more inclusive array of students. And, in the end, I come back to the question that inspired this entire volume, the relationship between the assessable and the ineffable in the contexts of our students' own hopes for a better future.

<p style="text-align:center">******</p>

It was 1976. Fresh from a highly specialized course of study in early modern history, first at Mount Holyoke College and then as a graduate student at Harvard University, I had taken a position at Chicago State University. Chicago State was at the time in the midst of fast-paced change, both in mission and in demographics. A former teachers college that was redefining itself as a regional comprehensive campus, it had become an overwhelmingly majority "minority" institution—albeit with many white faculty.

Many of the students at Chicago State had come from dismally inadequate public schools in Chicago—most as recent graduates and some, then returning to college in mid-life, many years earlier. Hired by the University for its Ford Foundation–launched "University Without Walls" (UWW) program and quickly assigned to deal with other innovative programs as well, I was working both with a cadre of very capable, but nonetheless still un-credentialed "returning adult" learners and also with a set of notably under-prepared

traditional-age college students.

I was attracted to both the challenges and the possibilities—the energy and native talent—that Chicago State students presented. Inspired like many of my age cohort by the civil rights momentum of the 1960s, I actively wanted to work with these first-generation college students.

Alas, as I soon realized, I was completely lacking in practical knowledge about how to respond to our students' educational needs. My graduate work had not included even an hour's worth of time on the real-world students I might find in my classroom, much less on the mysterious subject of "learning." Now, thanks to these suddenly glaring omissions, I found myself in uncharted waters.

With the traditional-age students, I faced the fundamental question of what it means to foster "critical inquiry" in young people who in some cases had not yet mastered the paragraph. These students were appealing and energetic and hopeful about their futures. But many of them needed fundamental writing instruction at a level that I could barely envision, much less effectively provide. A well-crafted lecture—or even a seminar—on Renaissance history was not going to do the job for students who had been searingly underserved by their previous schooling.

With the returning adult students, I faced a massive disconnect between their very practical reason for returning to college—to obtain a work-useful degree in the shortest possible amount of time—and my own commitment, supported by the mission of the UWW program, to ensure that their individualized plans of study added up to a "liberal" or "liberal arts" education.

All the UWW students already were working because concurrent job experience related to their studies was a firm requirement for admission to the program. By design, UWW built out from their actual career interests, seeking individualized ways of bringing a liberal education context to their particular educational priorities.

I loved the idea of helping students "individualize" their liberal education, which was, in fact, exactly what I had done as an undergraduate at Mount Holyoke. But very soon into my work at Chicago State I came to the uncomfortable but world-altering realization that for all the years I had spent in some of the nation's most admired "liberal arts" institutions, I had only the vaguest working conception of what I—or we in our UWW program—even meant by a "liberal" or "liberal arts" education (see fig. 1 for working definitions of these concepts).

Even less had I developed a conception of liberal education that might create common ground with the interests, inclinations, and very basic practical needs of the Chicago State students I was employed to guide and teach.

We in the UWW program were committed to providing a liberal education for our working adult students. Chicago State was committed to providing a well-rounded education, with a significant general education component, for all its students. But what exactly did that mean for our actual practice? And what did it mean for my guidance to students who shared neither my enthusiasm for liberal education nor my presuppositions about what was important to a good education?

LIBERAL EDUCATION: An approach to college learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It emphasizes broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g., science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth achievement in a specific field of interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility as well as strong intellectual and practical skills that span all major fields of study (e.g., communication, analytical, and problem-solving skills), and includes a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings.

LIBERAL ARTS: Specific disciplines (e.g., the humanities, sciences, and social sciences).

LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES: A particular institutional type—often small, often residential—that facilitates close interaction between faculty and students, while grounding its curriculum in the liberal arts disciplines.

ARTES LIBERALES: Historically, the basis for the modern liberal arts: the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music) and the *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric).

GENERAL EDUCATION: The part of a liberal education curriculum shared by all students. It provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and forms the basis for developing important intellectual, civic, and practical capacities. General education can take many forms, and increasingly includes both introductory and advanced levels of learning.

Fig. 1. "Guide to Frequently Confused Terms," adapted from Association of American Colleges and Universities, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a National Goes to College* (25).

I knew, of course, that a liberal education certainly comprised critical thinking and writing, the skills so many of my traditional-age students conspicuously lacked. (The adult students' competence level was higher, in part because the admissions process for UWW required substantial writing.) But how did one cultivate "critical thinking" in students who were still struggling with the formulation of their thoughts in standard English?

With both sets of students, I faced the question of the relationship between liberal education and a major in one of the arts and sciences disciplines. Somewhat unthinkingly, I had absorbed from the DNA of my own educational experience the assumption that the transformative power of a liberal education was possible *only* in the arts and sciences disciplines and that a focus on some other field was a different species of learning altogether.

But almost none of my students—either the returning adults or the traditional-age students—intended to major in one of the arts and sciences. They were in college to expand their opportunities, and for most that meant studying a field whose title seemed plainly related to real-world jobs: business administration, marketing, criminal justice, education, the various health fields.

What did it mean to provide a liberal education if students were studying "non-liberal arts" subjects?

Given the students' choice of major fields, the general education or distribution requirements appeared to loom large in the achievement of that "liberal education" signature. And, in fact, it was a degree requirement at Chicago State that all students needed to complete at least thirty hours in the humanities, the social sciences, the sciences, the arts, mathematics, and writing.

Perhaps, I mused, it was primarily general education—never seriously dis-

cussed at all, either in my undergraduate or graduate studies—that held the real key to a "liberal education." This was an interesting possibility, especially in Chicago, where the weight of the University of Chicago's much-celebrated "core curriculum" carried outsize influence, with faculty at least, even at a very different kind of institution.

But general education at Chicago State—and almost everywhere else—was defined in terms of a menu of "distribution categories" rather than as a focused set of core courses. And distribution requirements soon proved, in practice, to be a very weak key indeed to a liberal education. In truth, many of my students seemed to regard the general education requirements not as the key to excellence, but rather as a mystifying or even infuriating impediment to their own intended purposes.

One particularly memorable adult advisee, faced with my insistence on the "distribution requirements" that were written into the UWW program, angrily delivered her written decision to take two courses in American history "in order to fulfill the requirement that I pay money to study subjects in which I have no interest."

We were clear at Chicago State that she had to fulfill the arts and sciences requirements. She—heading for a career in elementary teaching!—was equally clear that she could see no point to them.

These conflicts, which were frequent, pointed to the larger question: What *were* our root goals in insisting on arts and sciences general education courses as a necessary component to the degree?

And even more important, how would I transform students' skepticism or outright resistance into something resembling the transformative learning I myself had experienced in college?

And, finally, what exactly did we mean by liberal education? In what way did we expect liberal education to be a meaningful resource for these first generation students?

Fast Forward to the Present

All these questions launched a journey of inquiry, self-reflection, and rich if decidedly "on-the-job" learning that led eventually to my current role as president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). AAC&U is the major national association working on the quality of undergraduate college learning, and our mission is to make the "aims of liberal learning a vigorous and constant influence on institutional purpose and educational practice in higher education" (*Strategic Plan*). Founded in 1915 to support the primacy of colleges of arts and sciences—both independent colleges and units within larger universities—AAC&U has evolved over the past twenty years into a "big tent" association that draws its 1,200 institutional members from all parts of postsecondary education, private, public, large, small, two-year, and four-year. Collectively, AAC&U members have embraced a call to "Aim High—and Make Excellence Inclusive" (*Strategic Plan*) by adapting the traditions and strengths of liberal education to twenty-first-century contexts and challenges.

Readers familiar with AAC&U's current work on both the "aims" and "essential learning outcomes" (see fig. 2) of liberal education will see immediately that all the questions I faced as an underprepared young academic three decades ago now stand directly at the heart of AAC&U's current signature initiative, Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP).[2]

LIBERAL EDUCATION: THE ESSENTIAL LEARNING OUTCOMES

Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World
- Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring

Intellectual and Practical Skills, Including
- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

Practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance

Personal and Social Responsibility, Including
- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges

Integrative Learning, Including
- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems

Fig. 2. "The Essential Learning Outcomes," Association of American Colleges and Universities, *College Learning for the New Global Century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise* (3).

The LEAP initiative, launched in 2005 and designed to extend at least through 2015, explores for students and society alike the same issues I was so ill-equipped to address—either in theory or in practice—when I left graduate school and began to work with first-generation college students in all their variety, energy, hopefulness, and need. But LEAP, I hasten to say, benefits from three decades of work throughout higher education on how best to support first-generation students, and returning adults as well, as they come in ever larger numbers to higher education.

In 1976, I was tackling core questions of educational purpose and effective practice largely on my own. Today, many networks of scholars and teaching faculty are working together, with a growing sense of shared mission, on just these questions. Collectively they are building a body of evidence on "what works" in higher education, especially with students from underserved communities. And, steadily if too slowly, reformers are beginning to wield significant educational influence across all sectors in postsecondary education.

The truth is that my own experience at Chicago State, which seemed so *sui generis* at the time, was in fact a very small part of a much larger generational shift that was just starting in that era to gain momentum across higher education. Colleges and universities were opening their doors wider than ever before, self-consciously reaching out to embrace students and communities that traditionally had had very limited access or no access at all to higher education. Programs aimed at returning adults were multiplying all over the United States, and by the turn of the twenty-first century, both older students and underprepared traditional-age students would constitute an emerging majority in higher education.

All of this has sent the academy "back to school," so to speak, to better understand the practices that effectively foster students' intellectual and personal development, and to invent, test, and scale up the uses of what we now call "engaged learning" to better support this increasingly significant population.

As a result, the educational practices AAC&U advances through LEAP build from the collective insights of innovative faculty and academic leaders throughout the United States—at "national institutions" and "regional institutions" alike. What *is* new, I believe, is the effort AAC&U is making to synthesize many different "reform agendas"—ranging from "writing across the curriculum" to diversity learning, community-based learning, undergraduate research, and the like—to provide a comprehensive "guiding vision" for higher education, for our students, and for the public at large. (See fig. 2 and note 2.)

LEAP is not launching a new direction in higher education so much as turning a spotlight on far-reaching changes that have already begun to alter our understanding of both the aims and the signature practices of a twenty-first-century liberal education. These changes are intended to serve everyone, but they have particular "compensatory" benefits, it turns out, for higher education's "new majority students" who are very much like the students I met so long ago at Chicago State (Kuh 17-20). Today's students work while studying; they commute rather than live on campus; they bring the world to the classroom; they often are underprepared for college; and, on every level, they challenge the academy to rethink its most basic precepts about excellence and inclusion.

Over time, if too slowly, these recently included students have forced revolutionary change both in the practice of liberal education, and now through the LEAP amplifier, in its stated purposes as well. These changes remain a work in progress, as all of us learn together how to better serve the millions of underprepared students who are now the new majority in American higher education. But, taken together, the myriad endeavors and experiments all over the United States to better serve contemporary college students from every walk of life are adding up both to a new vision for inclusive excellence in lib-

eral education and to a new era of more educationally intentional and integrative practices that can help our students make rich connections between what they learn in college and the lives they want to live.

Fulfilling the larger promise of a liberal education forces us to think much harder—and to learn from many pioneering practitioners and scholars—about the connections between knowledge and its applications, and about the way experience figures in making knowledge both illuminating and empowering.

In the pages that follow, I share some of my own "lessons learned" from this shared journey of inquiry and reflection on the aims and practices of a contemporary liberal education. And, at the end, I come back to the question that still seems to haunt entirely too many academics: Is something essential actually lost when we seek to put liberal education to work in the wider world?

As you will guess, my answer is no—not only is nothing lost, but much is gained. And, in the context of this particular set of essays, I would add that nothing is lost and much is gained when we actually hold ourselves (as faculty and institutional leaders) accountable for helping students show that they have achieved the explicit "outcomes" of liberal education. But as with all transformative insights, my answers are informed by my own experiential learning. As I believe is often the case with students, what I learned from experience helped me recognize the inadequacy of my initial assumptions about liberal learning—and also propelled me to enlarge them.

My Own Transformative Learning

Back to Chicago State in 1976 and beyond. Prompted both by populist idealism and by my increasingly urgent questions about the quality of student work, I signed up to take part in a voluntary "study group" whose members wanted to probe the usefulness of the emergent "competency movement" in higher education. Bringing together faculty from diverse institutions and a broad range of mostly liberal arts disciplines, together with a few administrators, the study group intended to assess whether there was anything of value in a competency-based approach to learning for underprepared college students.

In my view, the competency movement of that era and the learning outcomes movement in our own time have much in common, most notably the emphasis on translating the "tacit knowledge" scholars unconsciously live by into "explicit standards" that can guide faculty and students alike in the development of intellectual and practical capabilities. Defining the expected outcomes or competencies students need to achieve and making standards for their performance explicit is one feature of this approach, but this is only part of the larger task. The real pay-off in an outcomes approach comes when faculty learn how to develop sequenced assignments that enable students to practice the intended learning and when students learn to take responsibility for meeting or exceeding the expected standards of performance.

The working assumption behind this approach is that every field creates and privileges certain procedures for making an argument and/or testing a course of action, but that too often—especially in the arts and sciences—faculty have internalized this "procedural knowledge" without actually ever nam-

ing it. As a result, faculty often are hindered in helping students grasp the elements of what counts as good work and what does not. By studying examples of "good work" and "poor work," we can give voice to our own tacit standards and, most important, provide clearer guidance and feedback to novice learners so that they can make progress toward higher levels of achievement.

Ultimately, we hope, novice learners will move beyond trying to follow "rules of good practice" to become both insightful and inventive in their deployment of these frameworks. But making standards explicit provides the needed scaffolding to at least get new learners working in a productive direction.

In effect, therefore, that informal study group became my first introduction to the whole idea of intentionality and explicit expectations as a framing "compass" that would help students navigate the mysteries of college-level work.[3] The group was useful in pointing me toward the literature of competency-based learning and toward examples of competency-based programs that already were springing up at different Chicago-area colleges and universities.

What stands out for me now, however, from that 1976 effort to better respond to the needs of my actual students, is the vigorous debate over the very concept of "competencies" that broke out on the first evening that the study group convened. We were all curious about the entire idea of competency-based learning. But many were far from convinced.

"The most important forms of learning in the liberal arts are ineffable!" contended one young faculty member who was then teaching in the Chicago community college system. I listened with interest since this scholar came from my own graduate program at Harvard. He had been working with underprepared graduates from the Chicago public schools somewhat longer than I. Had he found some way to sustain our ivy-infused values and teach his students successfully at the same time?

"The whole idea of breaking history or literature down into 'competencies' is repugnant," he continued with vigor. "It distorts and destroys the very things that are most valuable to our students!" "What we really need to do," others agreed, "is help students see what is so exciting about our disciplines. We have to model, in our own teaching and style, the passion and excitement we ourselves feel for our subjects."

Having tried this strategy already, I was skeptical. And I was not alone.

"We need to make our subjects accessible to the actual students we have," protested others. "We can't just tell them that the liberal arts are valuable for reasons that are beyond explanation. We have to somehow connect our subjects to the things the students themselves consider important. We have to break through our own mystique."

"Our students seek jobs and career advancement," others chimed in. "How do we make the liberal arts relevant to those goals?"

The debate raged on—in that forum and countless others like it—and still does today, in college and university contexts all across the nation. Even as I have been writing this essay, there has been a new national furor over whether the humanities are and should be "use-less," or whether it is (finally) time to better explain and make good on their real-world significance.

For me, however, that informal study group clarified the core question at stake—demystification—and set me off on a course I have pursued for over three decades: the effort to break out of "my discipline" as a self-contained and self-referential scholarly community and to think much harder about the ways in which I hoped the insights of this discipline would actually be used by students in their lives beyond the classroom and beyond the academy.

I was willing to concede, for the sake of argument, that some of the pleasures of a liberal education really are ineffable: personal, interior, spontaneous, exhilarating. But those moments do not come at the beginning, and they are not likely to come at all if novice learners end up viewing the arts and sciences mainly as a set of barriers they need to get "out of the way" as soon as possible before proceeding to the "real point" of college.

The challenge, I came to believe, is not one of "getting students excited" by how well we perform in their presence but, rather, of creating opportunities to help students see more in their own questions and explorations than they could have discovered on their own. Our task as educators, I now think, is to give our students a motivating reason to invest themselves in the project of developing those habits of mind and heart that characterize a liberally educated person (see fig. 2).

In this context, the skills developed through liberal education are a means to an end rather than ends in themselves. The ultimate goal is to foster students' own growing capacity to work productively on projects and problems that they themselves want to address.

Prompted by this insight, I began to reflect on how I myself had "gotten hooked" on scholarly inquiry and what light that might shed on how to help my students toward the illuminating power of a liberal education.

The love of learning that a scholar gains (and uses to make a living) comes with an acquired ability to "make a discovery," whether that discovery is one of flashing insight, new connections between elements previously seen as separate, or the pleasure that comes when painstaking work actually begins to take form and even significance.

How had I developed that inclination myself? How, in particular, did I move from my high school standing as a young person willing to work extremely hard on subjects I hated, simply because I wanted a good grade, to someone who found learning illuminating and, in a profound sense, necessary?

Miss Brock

Those reflections, all prompted by my Chicago State students and that informal Chicago study group, led me back in turn to Miss Brock, the faculty member who taught both semesters of my required year-long "baby English" course at Mount Holyoke. Prior to my arrival at Chicago State, I had come to think of myself as a budding scholar, someone who wanted to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in early modern history. But now I reached back to my initial year of college, when I was not a professed future scholar at all, but rather a somewhat confused young woman who was trying to figure out what was expected of her at Mount Holyoke College.

I had my own "transformative experience" in that initial year of college, a set of catalytic events that made me genuinely interested in learning and the light it might cast—not on the world's understanding and certainly not on the advancement of scholarship, but rather on my own actual decisions and choices. What were those experiences? Looking back, I thought with new attentiveness about the role Miss Brock, my first year English professor, had played in that transformative experience and what her example might mean for the very different kind of students I was working with at Chicago State.

Praised as a strong writer all the way through high school, I had not wanted to take the two-semester required "baby English" course at all. To earn exemption, I had taken an optional reading and writing take-home examination over the summer. (I failed.) Once enrolled, I did not find Miss Brock's teaching particularly compelling. Fascinated with iconography and metaphysical poetry, she often left me absolutely clueless as to what she was talking about. She had brilliant students with whom she was constantly in dialogue during class meetings. I was not one of them.

Miss Brock put me forever in her debt, however, by the way she approached our research papers, which were required in both semesters of baby English. Painstakingly, she took the time to call in each one of her students for a separate discussion about the possible topic for our initial research. And in that conversation, she asked me to identify "a real question; something you really want to know the answer to; something whose answer is important to you."

Initially I was puzzled; this kind of exchange was completely new in my experience. But finally, a bit reluctantly, I told her my "big question." What I most wanted to know, I explained, was whether miracles in fact "proved" that the Roman Catholic Church was really the One True Church, as I had been taught and raised to believe.

To her enormous credit, Miss Brock did not laugh, or frown, or even allow a small sliver of a smile. (You, dear reader, may have done less well.) Instead, she nodded affirmatively; thought for a couple of minutes and then suggested that I would find it "profitable" to do my paper on mystical experience, both Christian and non-Christian. She suggested a couple of books to get me started; she warmly encouraged me to look into some of the great mystical poets. She invited me to come back in to see her as my work progressed.

And off I went, on what turned into one of the great investigations of my life. Or so, in my own mind, I considered it. In truth, as she probably surmised, I was reconsidering my relationship (privately) to my religious upbringing. The reading, thinking, and writing I did for that paper was transformative in myriad ways. It changed the way I thought about religion, my own choices, my own interests. It "hooked" me on scholarship as a source of insight and power.

It was Mount Holyoke's practice to retain copies of all the first-year papers students wrote in baby English and to return those collected papers to us when we graduated as seniors. When I received this collected set in my last week of college, I reached eagerly for that initial research paper on mystical experience.

What I found was a paper that was stunningly naïve in its framing and

utterly hesitant in its conclusions, which were shyly advanced only in the final two pages. Mostly the paper was descriptive rather than analytical as I struggled to describe a different order of experience from anything I had previously encountered and to somehow connect these experiences to my own questions about the standing of Catholic doctrine.

And yet, naïve and novice though it was, this was the paper and this was the work that had launched my own commitment to scholarship—and more fundamentally, to the value and significance of a liberal education.

The key, I am persuaded, was the original question—and especially the generosity with which my teacher received my original "big question." I really wanted to know whether the Catholic Church was the One True Church, and the power of what was going on in my mind, in my own private thoughts as I approached this topic, vastly exceeded the actual sophistication of the written work itself. In my own mind, that investigation into a different realm of religious experience was world-enhancing. And so, in truth, it was.

Reflecting on all this, I began to put similar insights to work with my own students. In a variety of different ways, I set out to get them to tell me their own "significant questions" and I looked for ways to connect those questions with their assignments in my courses. I did not anticipate that any of them would choose a career in scholarship, but I did expect them to take seriously their own questions, and to put pen to paper in the exploration of those questions, using evidence, using sources, making an argument, developing a case.

Mount Holyoke was, of course, a small liberal arts college. The programs I led at Chicago State similarly were small programs, serving a few hundred students, rather than thousands.

Is it feasible to imagine that this kind of strategy can be used on a broader scale, for example, in the general education courses that are required almost everywhere?

One answer to this is that almost every college, university, and community college now teaches at least one writing-intensive course in a small-class context. Sometimes the class is basic composition; sometimes it comes in the form of a topically organized "inquiry" seminar. Some institutions also provide "first-year experiences" that include small-class workshops and seminars designed to teach students how to navigate the college or university environment.

Just as Miss Brock used "baby English" at Mount Holyoke, either context could be used to provide students with both opportunity and incentive to research their own "big questions"—and to discover, as I did, that scholarly work can make a difference in one's own life, as well as in the life of our society.

The most important challenge we face in fostering transformative learning is not the absence of contexts in which it could feasibly be attempted. Rather, it is our willingness to accept a state of affairs—endemic throughout higher education—in which some students benefit from the best that a liberal education can offer, while millions of others, typically students from less advantaged backgrounds, are steered toward narrow training and less ambitious goals for their own college learning.

So, Is Liberal Education "Ineffable?" And Can It Be Assessed?

Clearly, something happened in my own experience at Mount Holyoke that was personal as well as powerful. And similarly, I believe, when that "light goes on" for our students, it goes on for an individual, helping that particular student make sense of his or her own very particular questions, interests, concerns, or commitments.

But knowing how personal a liberating experience really is not does release us from a foundational responsibility. Through guided practice, feedback, and assistance, we still need to help students develop the analytical and investigative tools they need in order to get beyond the initial question—however naïve or instrumental or relentlessly "practical" it may be—and to explore the implications of their question, to develop an argument, to use evidence, to consider the alternatives, and to be able to explain what they have concluded and why.

As my vignette makes clear, Miss Brock had three goals in mind (at least) for my assignments. The first was that I should care about the work I was doing, and take it seriously. The second was that I should expand beyond the boundaries of my initial knowledge and experience. Hearing my question, she did not hesitate to send me off on a topic that I did not even know existed—the realm of mystical experience, non-Christian as well as Christian.

Finally, she expected me to write a documented research paper, and to show that I was using my sources in answering my question. When I handed in the paper, she undoubtedly saw—as I saw, four years later—that my first research paper was written in very broad strokes, long on description, short on evaluative interpretation. When we met during the second semester about my second research paper, she suggested that I write on the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. At the time, I thought she was pointing me toward a poet who himself was struggling with religious doubt and passion, a point of reference for my own implicit quest.

Hopkins' religious struggles undoubtedly were the reason Miss Brock chose that particular poet. But now, looking back over the years, I suspect that she also wanted me to work in a more focused way on "close reading" of carefully constructed poetic texts. In that second paper, far more than in the first, I began to ground my claims in textual analysis; to read at a deeper level; to develop an argument that took seriously the words and the textual structure so carefully created by the artist.

 In other words, still honoring my own significant questions and commitments, Miss Brock strategically linked those questions to the intellectual tasks of both "close reading" and evidence-based argument. What she gave me was the best of two worlds: serious attention to my own questions, which were anything but "scholarly," and serious guided practice in developing much better analytical skills than I had brought with me to college.

This distinction can help us, I believe, differentiate between those aspects of liberal education that really are "ineffable"—or at least highly interior and personal—and those that lend themselves directly to meaningful assessment. The assessment questions pertain not to the conclusion I reached in my exploration of religious and mystical experience, but rather to whether I was able to

examine different positions on my topic, consider evidence in support of those positions, and develop an evidence-based position of my own. I did not, in fact, do that particularly well in my first research paper for Miss Brock. But, by the end of my initial year in college, I had acquired the concept of "close reading" and had started to develop some facility in connecting my argument to textual evidence. The skills required to make an evidence-based argument can—and should—be both practiced and assessed not once, but again and again, from early courses to culminating capstone experiences. The focus on constant practice, at increasingly higher levels of expectation and achievement, is a necessary part of an empowering liberal education.

I was fortunate that "baby English" was a two-semester course, taught by the same instructor each time. She saw where I needed to improve, given my work in the first semester, and she deliberately gave me assignments that would help me improve in the second semester.

For today's students, electronic technology offers new ways to achieve the same kind of effect. As colleges and universities begin to adopt electronic portfolios to capture student work, it becomes possible for any faculty member to peruse a student's written work and discern whether that student is actually making progress in the development of analytical and interpretive skills, or just repeating the same weak techniques again and again. It becomes possible—at least potentially—to give students assignments that build from their strengths and help them correct their weaknesses. In principle, we could do today, for all students, what Miss Brock did so brilliantly for me. But to make full use of this potential, we would have to move beyond the idea that the professor's task is to profess. We would have to insist, instead, that the professor's real task is to assess where students currently are in their development of key intellectual capacities and, building from that assessment, to help students move to a higher level of both effort and achievement.

Similarly, electronic technology gives us the power to see whether students seem to pursue particular "big questions" or issues over time, or whether they are just producing assignments because they have to. Is the student's learning starting to "come together" in transformative ways, across different courses and experiences? Does her portfolio show that she is probing particular issues and themes? Making connections across both courses and disciplines, and between her lived experiences and her studies? If yes, what catalysts might take the student's integration of learning to an even higher level? If not, what is standing in the way? How can the student's academic work become a more powerful resource, both for integrative learning and for the goals that brought her to college in the first place?

The students' own work over time provides insights into all these questions. We need to take seriously the evidence of that work, and, as faculty, provide both guidance and structure to help students take their capacities—and their questions—to a higher and fuller level.

Liberal Education and America's Promise

What then of the questions I began to raise about liberal education back

at Chicago State? What do we mean, or rather, what should we mean when we advocate liberal education for today's students, most of whom have come to college expecting that college will prepare them not to be scholars, but for opportunity and success in the world of work?

I have already indicated that I believe liberal education begins by taking seriously the issues and questions in the students' own minds. But what if the question they most want to pursue is how to do well in their jobs? Does that automatically put them beyond the true sphere of the liberal arts, except of course for the requisite dollop of general education courses necessary (on most campuses) to earn the degree?

In 1976, I believed that a liberal education could—and should—be transformative because college had been so illuminating and life-enhancing for me and most of my friends. Today, drawing on work being carried out across the United States, I am even more persuaded of the value and power of a liberal education, both for individual students and for a society that depends entirely on human capability for its economic future and its civic vitality.

To sustain that conviction, however, I have had to break free of some of the most fundamental assumptions I had previously held about liberal education—especially the idea that it can (and should) occur exclusively through the study of arts and sciences disciplines. The twentieth-century ideas about liberal education—which confined it to selected institutions, to selected disciplines, or to general education primarily—are no longer helpful to the larger cause of providing a life-enhancing education to all our students, especially all those "recently included" students who, only a few decades ago, would not have been in college at all.

Yes, our students have largely come to college because they want to earn a good living. But these motivations are not an impenetrable obstacle to their liberal learning. Rather, their motivations should be seen as an opportunity for expanding their understanding of what they want to accomplish through their work and of the connections between their intended work and the larger society of which they are a part.

My own education gave me, as I have tried to make clear, a set of tools that I could use to enlarge my own worldview and pursue my own significant interests. And that, I am persuaded, is what a liberal education needs to do for all our students, especially those who come to college convinced that the only point of their studies is to prepare for a job.

A student who comes to college, for example, seeking to move from sales to marketing, or from bookkeeping to accounting, is no more beyond the pale than I was at eighteen, with my shallow conviction that the magic of miracles could "prove" fundamental points about divine intention and religious obligation. Miss Brock made my initial questions a point of departure for further study and, by taking my actual questions seriously, she helped me to enlarge them. Something similar is possible for all our students, but only if we are willing to start with their actual mindset, which is so often very specific, very literal, and very practical.

One way to better appreciate our students' job concerns, I suspect, is to think harder about the connection between our students' obsession with "getting a job" and the journeys we ourselves have traversed toward professional competence. As a moment's reflection makes clear, after all, the problem I myself was facing in my initial year at Chicago State was that I was completely underprepared for the job I actually had. It is ironic that my Harvard credential opened the door to an appointment at Chicago State even though Harvard had not provided me with even a moment's rehearsal about how to connect my learning with my job.

My graduate program preferred to prepare me for work I might do— path-breaking scholarship—rather than for the work I almost certainly would do—teaching novice students who, like most graduates of our nation's public schools, need a huge amount of help to reap the full benefit of college. Nor was I alone. Even today, the most elite graduate programs remain largely indifferent to the actual work their students will do as faculty members, as campus leaders, or, increasingly often, in jobs beyond the academy.[4]

The questions I faced at Chicago State emerged not because I was especially philosophical, and certainly not because I was interested in defining liberal education for its own sake. They emerged because I was negotiating daily between my students' own priorities and the stated intention of our program to give them a liberal education.

I went off on the intellectual journey I pursued because I was working, and because I wanted to do a good job—not only for my students but also for myself. My notions of the goal at hand were rooted in my own experiences of transformative learning, but it was extremely clear to me that, given my students' very different experience of college (non-resident, working while learning, often much older, etc.), I would have to find different points of connection between their priorities and the realm of the liberal arts.

Over time, I have come to believe that the root problem I confronted was the liberal arts' self-imposed identity as "non-vocational." The roots of this identity are worth pursuing; they go back to the twining of the liberal arts tradition with religious institutions, as well as to the embrace of ancient Greek philosophy. But that is a topic for a different essay.

Here, I want to make the point that the positioning of liberal education as the opposite of vocational preparation is both willfully deceitful and foolishly self-defeating. It is deceitful because the actual outcomes of a liberal education (see fig. 2) are in fact a powerful form of preparation, not just for a particular job, but for the larger project of navigating a complex and fast-changing economy in which the typical college graduate will hold many jobs, in different industries, under different employers.

As my own saga shows, I had the skills I needed to "figure out" what I needed to do as a teacher and educator, and perhaps equally important, I had internalized a notion—from home and college—that if I was doing something I ought to do it as well as possible. It would have been better if I had had some preparation in connecting my schooling with my work, but even without that desirable apprenticeship, I at least had the intellectual skills and the sense

of personal and social responsibility to seek out help and eventually chart a productive course of action. I had acquired, in other words, the essential outcomes of a liberal education (see fig. 2). And these intellectual skills were, as they must be, initiatory rather than final; they created the context for continuing learning, much of which would be job-related.

And, of course, my experience is replicated millions of times over in the work histories of all the graduates who also translate their arts and sciences studies into successful careers in every possible endeavor and every part of the globe. They may struggle initially to get onto a good career path. But once launched, they both contribute and succeed.

So it is in fact misleading to assure college students that the liberal arts and sciences are "non-vocational." But it is also profoundly irresponsible—a willful renunciation of our responsibility—not to think carefully about the kind of influence educators and scholars actually hold within the wider world.

The fact of the matter is that most high school graduates will embark on postsecondary education, and most of those who enter college will work for all or a significant portion of their lives. We have an opportunity, therefore, to make the liberal arts and sciences a powerful resource, not just for an individual, but for the world our graduates create through the work they do and the values they bring with them to that work.

When we self-segregate the liberal arts and sciences from this wider world—insisting firmly on the value of learning for its own sake rather than for any vocational or instrumental purpose—we surrender the opportunity to examine with care how the values of the arts and sciences play out in the world of action, and how they might play out if we brought more mindfulness to these connections.

After I left Chicago State, I went to the University of Chicago, where the dean of my division assured me cheerfully: "We take great pride here in teaching absolutely nothing useful." I felt a chill when he said this and I find that sentiment, which is held firmly by many humanists (and recently promulgated widely by Stanley Fish in *The New York Times*[5]), chilling still.

Students who major in arts and sciences fields deserve to believe that they are pursuing studies that are intensely useful. And they need opportunities to connect their learning with the world of action, whether through internships, field-based projects, service learning, or the jobs so many of them already hold. They should not have to wait until they are out of college and on the job to think through the connections between their chosen fields and the work they will actually do. The connections will be there. The campus should play a role in illuminating and enriching them.

The majority of American college students do not, however, major in the arts and sciences at all. Like my students at Chicago State, they are choosing fields of study that are more transparently connected to the world of work. On campuses where this is the pattern, we have a double challenge. The first is to recognize that the outcomes of a liberal education (see fig. 2) both can and should be addressed in professional and career fields. Whatever the field, it requires its own version of the intellectual and practical skills that are neces-

sary elements in successful practice; it depends for its integrity on the sense of personal and social responsibility—the examined choices—its practitioners enact; and it faces its own "big questions" about its role in the wider world. Broad knowledge, advanced skills, ethical and civic responsibility, the ability to integrate one's learning in new contexts: these are the hallmarks of a liberal education, and these are also the prerequisites for productive practice in every sphere of endeavor.

The second challenge for campuses where arts and sciences majors are less commonly chosen is to tear down the silos that too often segregate the "true liberal arts" from professional and career fields. There are extraordinary opportunities both for scholarship and for creative teaching when faculty come together, across disciplinary boundaries, to link the insights of the arts and sciences with the challenges that face real-world practitioners in every sphere: health, business, government, public policy, technology, education. Big questions and significant opportunities for shared work abound in every field of endeavor. And arts and sciences faculty can play a strategic role in helping practitioners see those questions in new contexts and with much deeper insight. Conversely, the liberal arts have much to gain from studying the work of faculty who take seriously their role in the formation of professionals, in preparing graduates to work and contribute, ethically and creatively, to their chosen fields and through their work, to their communities.

Fulfilling the promise of a liberal education—for our time and our students—calls on us to approach our disciplines and our teaching in new ways and with a new concentration on the world of action. Our students need this from us. And so does our society.

NOTES

1   The vocabulary surrounding liberal education and liberal arts education is confused—and confusing. To cut through the thicket, the association I lead has developed a "Guide to Frequently Confused Terms." See fig. 1.

2   Readers can learn more about LEAP by visiting AAC&U's website. The signature report from the LEAP initiative is *College Learning for the New Global Century*, published by AAC&U in 2007, which outlines goals for a twenty-first-century college education, presents principles of excellence that build from best practice in higher education, and argues that the aims of liberal education should apply to all fields of college study, including professional and career fields. In 2008, the LEAP initiative released a study by George Kuh, *High-Impact Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*, which provides evidence that engaged or high-effort educational practices—e.g., learning communities, undergraduate research, capstone experiences—have "compensatory" benefits for students who start farther behind academically and for students from groups with high college drop-out rates. The LEAP initiative provides numerous resources to campus leaders and faculty working to create a more purposeful and empower-

3   ing educational experience for today's students.
     Give Students a Compass is one of the LEAP "Principles of Excellence" and
     is also the title of a multi-state AAC&U LEAP project, supported by the
     Carnegie Corporation of New York, State Farm Companies Foundation,
     and the Lumina Foundation for Education, to map expected outcomes for
     liberal education across the college curriculum.

4   From 1989 to 2003, AAC&U worked directly with graduate schools and
     some of their departments on new designs to prepare graduate students
     for their roles in teaching and academic leadership. The initial work was
     funded by a pilot grant from the Fund for the Improvement of
     Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). From 1993 to 2003, this work was
     expanded through major grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the
     National Science Foundation, and Atlantic Philanthropic Services. Over
     time, AAC&U and its partner organization, the Council of Graduate
     Schools, worked directly with more than forty graduate universities to
     broaden their approach to graduate student preparation. While this work,
     and comparable efforts by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement
     of Teaching, was valuable to those influenced by it, the gap between grad-
     uate education and the needs of today's undergraduates remains wide
     indeed. Moreover, the average new PhD is as ignorant today as I was in
     1976 about the traditions of liberal education and their meaning in society.

5   See, for example, "Will the Humanities Save Us?" where Fish writes that
     "to the question 'of what use are the humanities?', the only honest answer
     is none whatsoever. And it is an answer that brings honor to its subject."

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BIOGRAPHY

Carol Geary Schneider has been President of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) since 1998. With a membership of 1,200 institutions, including colleges and universities of all types and sizes, AAC&U is the leading national organization devoted to advancing and strengthening undergraduate liberal education. Since becoming President, she has initiated several major initiatives, including *Liberal Education and America's Promise* (LEAP), a ten-year public advocacy and campus action initiative designed to engage students and the public with what really matters in a college education for the twenty-first century. The LEAP campaign builds on AAC&U's previous major effort, *Greater Expectations: The Commitment to Quality as a Nation Goes to College*, a multi-year initiative designed to articulate the aims of a twenty-first-century liberal education and to identify comprehensive, innovative models that improve learning for all undergraduate students. Under her leadership, AAC&U has also expanded its work on diversity, launched several new projects on civic engagement and the disciplines, and deepened its capacity to support campuses working on educational change.

MAKING THE CASE FOR DISCIPLINE-BASED ASSESSMENT

RACHELLE L. BROOKS

COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY FACULTY have been increasingly recognizing the value of some sort of evaluation and assessment of the impact of teaching strategies. Perhaps initially encouraged by administrators, accreditation organizations, or disciplinary associations, once faculty members are introduced to assessment many are willing to engage with it to see if it can be used for improving their classroom practices or teaching techniques. There is often, however, a wide gap between the conceptual agreement that assessment has some value and the devising and employment of a concrete assessment strategy.

How can we best gather the information we would like to have for learning about the strengths and weaknesses of our teaching? How can we know whether our students are really learning what we think and hope they are learning? What strategies should we use? What methods? In many cases, the answers to these questions can emerge from one's own disciplinary framework. By working with others in one's discipline and by focusing on the learning goals and methods central to it, faculty can devise an assessment program for improving teaching and learning in their classrooms. Such efforts often also fulfill larger institutional desires to demonstrate student learning outcomes.

In the following pages I argue that this sort of assessment *within* the discipline, rather than that which attempts to exist outside or above all disciplines, has the potential to be more "actionable" for faculty and other institutional policymakers (that is, they are able to identify actions to take in their classrooms or programs based on the results of the assessments). Discipline-based assessment is also more sensitive to variations in learning between groups of students.[1] Assessments that do not attend to disciplinary differences or that are not consciously rooted in specific disciplines have inherent weaknesses that limit their validity and their utility for the improvement of teaching. Unfortunately, most large-scale, institution-wide assessment efforts cannot be used at the disciplinary level because they limit their study to samples of students with too few individuals to capture learning in a specific major. They attempt to draw conclusions about *all* students, irrespective of their majors. In addition, such assessments often possess unexamined disciplinary biases that create an

uneven playing field for making meaningful comparisons between majors. Questions in an assessment have disciplinary "leanings" that are ignored at our peril when setting out to measure student cognitive growth.

In this essay I argue that, while remaining rooted within the existing framework of one's discipline, assessments can be devised for both content-based knowledge (which is routinely evaluated by faculty) *and* the broader, more generalized learning outcomes often associated with a liberal arts education, such as critical thinking. In creating such an assessment it is possible to avoid getting caught up in either the innumerable specificities of each student's college experience or overly broad generalities about all college students. By way of example I discuss a study which involves working with faculty to engage in this type of discipline-based outcomes assessment to learn about the broader learning outcomes of their disciplines. This example of assessments for classics and political science helps to illustrate the distinction I make between assessment *in* the discipline and assessment *of* the discipline.

Student Learning Happens in Disciplines

Higher education in the United States is part of a complex ecology of institutions, policies, programs of study, and student experiences.[2] Any attempt to measure undergraduate collegiate learning must make some effort to attend to this diversity of educational options. Jeffrey Smith's articulation of some of the types of heterogeneity in higher education is instructive: "… we can think about students having a variety of possible outcomes that depend on their own characteristics (measured and unmeasured), the particular college they attend and its characteristics (and the characteristics of its student body as a whole), and the particular program or programs they undertake" (133). Thus, the choices students make about the institution at which they will study, the learning opportunities they will pursue there, and the disciplinary major with which they will engage all bear on the educational outcomes they will have attained upon completion of their degrees. It is not the case that all students at a single institution will experience similar levels of cognitive change during college, no more than it is the case that they will have identical experiences while enrolled.

George Kuh, a leading scholar of undergraduate education, has identified a set of "high-impact educational practices" that research has shown improves student retention rates and increases students' engagement with their collegiate education. These practices include first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences (such as a "core" curriculum), learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning, internships, and capstone courses or projects. There is wide divergence in the extent to which these practices are employed across the spectrum of undergraduate institutions. And even once in place, unless they are required, not all students will choose to endeavor at these types of learning experiences, nor will they be available at similar levels or be of comparable quality across all majors.

It is notable that several of these "high-impact" practices are most

likely to take place at the discipline-level, within one's major. Undergraduate research projects, collaborative assignments, writing-intensive courses,[3] and capstone projects are all educational activities directed by individual faculty members. The benefits to undergraduates of faculty-driven, discipline-based work was also noted by Richard Light in his decade-long study of college seniors. He writes, "… students who get the most out of college, who grow the most academically, and who are happiest organize their time to include activities with faculty members, or with several other students, focused around accomplishing substantive academic work" (10). Such work will surely vary depending on the faculty member's discipline. So, while a physics major may not have access to many writing-intensive courses in her discipline, she may have numerous opportunities to engage in research projects with faculty. Such differences by field of study impact students' learning outcomes in measurable ways, with one student growing at ease with composing an essay or using writing to summarize a body of work, while the other emerges confident in her ability to identify and evaluate multiple possible solutions to unfamiliar problems encountered in an experiment.

Why "One-size-fits-all" Assessment Really Doesn't

The "one-size-fits-all" approach to undergraduate assessment, where all students are assessed with the same instrument and no distinctions by discipline are made, has found a niche at many institutions. It gained a great deal of momentum when in 2006 the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education called on higher education to demonstrate and report on learning outcomes. In its report, entitled *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, the Commission urged institutions to employ assessments of student learning that would enable comparisons between institutions. However, the ability to compare at the college or university level comes at a serious cost to the local utility of the assessment (Banta, "A Warning"). It usually means using a standardized test to generalize about all undergraduates as a group at an institution, regardless of their major or any other educational choices, including their participation in any of the aforementioned "high-impact" activities. Findings from an institution-wide assessment are also often impossible to relate back to specific instructional techniques and other types of pedagogical or curricular choices that faculty have the power to control. Such assessments offer faculty members little, if any, information about how they might improve students' educational experiences or about what they may be doing particularly well in terms of their instructional practices.

Assessments for institutional comparisons also require measuring learning in a uniform way for institutions. The choice of a particular, standardized way to measure learning is also a choice about the types of learning that matter, which has disciplinary implications. As noted earlier, there is an inherent, often unrecognized disciplinary bias in any measurement of student learning. This is perhaps easiest to see when examining students' competencies with

direct measures of learning. A test of general written communication abilities or mathematical competencies privileges students in particular majors in obvious ways. For example, those in science, technology, engineering, or math will likely score very well on an assessment of mathematical ability. Alternatively, assessments of more general learning outcomes such as critical thinking tend to use items tied to the "general education" curriculum in an effort to ensure their relevance to a wide population. The underlying assumption appears to be that these broad outcomes such as critical thinking should be assessed with broad, widely applicable measures. Thinking and reasoning skills, however, are developed through numerous educational experiences, many of which are discipline-specific (McPeck; Ennis). Students in humanities, science, and social science disciplines may all be trained to evaluate evidence, draw conclusions, and make arguments, but some are taught to do so using texts while others become proficient at leveraging quantitative data for their analyses. To ignore disciplines when assessing thinking and reasoning skills is an attempt to divorce them from their developmental roots. Further, it is hard to imagine a type of assessment that is truly content-neutral. For example, assessments of students' thinking abilities that ask them to answer questions in essay form are biased in favor of those who are better trained in writing or for whom English is a first language. Trudy Banta, who has spent nearly three decades examining student learning outcomes and various ways to measure them, has repeatedly argued that "[n]o standardized exam is truly content free, and if it were, it would be a better test of general intelligence than of what is learned in college" ("Reliving the History" 4).

One strategy for avoiding standardized tests of collegiate learning is to use a survey asking students about their learning in college. These surveys gauge students' perceptions of their improvement in certain areas and their satisfaction with their college experiences. Unfortunately, there is also evidence that disciplinary biases are present even when these *indirect* measures of learning are employed, such as in student opinion surveys about educational gains and engagement in college.

A recent study of survey results from approximately 58,000 students in the University of California (UC) system provided an opportunity to examine the extent to which majors are related to how students perceive their educational outcomes and their level of educational engagement (Chatman). Because the data were obtained from students at multiple campuses in the UC system, it was possible to separately examine the influences of campus and major. The principle finding of the study was that the major had a more important impact on student perspectives and engagement than did the campus at which students were enrolled. The author of the study, Steve Chatman, notes that "[t]he most important result is that academic experience and student engagement varies by program of study in predictable ways" (11). For example, he found that students in the humanities and social sciences reported higher levels of satisfaction with their educational experience than did those in mathematics and computer science or engineering. He asserts that "differences [by academic discipline] would lead to misleading conclusions when comparing one

program to a campus average and when comparing one campus to another" (15). Ultimately, any campus- or institution-wide averages will be dictated by the proportion of students in particular majors. In this case, campuses with more math and engineering majors would have lower satisfaction scores. Chatman writes:

> Modern public research universities are academically diverse and, by publicly supported agreement, serve extremely diverse populations. The accountability strategies that have been at least partially successful in improving elementary and secondary education cannot be easily generalized to postsecondary study because postsecondary education is more complex by at least an order of magnitude. Elementary schools offer few course choices, secondary schools several more within a few program tracks, and postsecondary institutions offer a hundred or more academic majors and thousands of courses…. If public accountability demands comparative performance [between institutions], then the unit of analysis for performance should be the academic discipline. (3)

Assessment *in*, but not *of*, the Discipline

Given the disciplinary biases present in both direct and indirect measures of student learning, it would seem that we are far better off recognizing and negotiating disciplinary distinctions when approaching questions about the cognitive value of a college education. Rather than ignoring the "confounding" variable of the disciplinary major when examining student learning, it is possible to explicitly address its role in the development of cognitive growth. Such an approach requires asking hard questions about the learning goals for a major, what a major offers students, how a set of required and elective courses contribute to the overall goals, and how best to uncover the potential contributions of a major to a student's overall learning. But this approach is worth the effort because assessment that fails to do so risks providing little useful information for faculty at best, and of generalizing false conclusions about learning outcomes at worst.

While many discussions within professional associations can be contentious when trying to identify a concrete set of "learning objectives" for undergraduates majoring in a particular discipline, smaller groups of faculty, such as chairs of those teaching in liberal arts colleges, may be better able to engage in such discussions by asking, "What is it that we do best?" or "What do we want all of our majors to be able to do well?" or "What have we seen over our careers that makes our students who major in our disciplines stand out from other students?" Answers to such questions can begin to shed light on how a major might contribute to broader learning outcomes, which are developed *in* a discipline, but are not unique to it.[4] These outcomes are learning that stays with a student long after specific course content is forgotten, and the type of learning treasured in the liberal arts because it is widely applicable to many different occupational pursuits. Michael Roth, president of Wesleyan

University, articulates specifics for this type of learning in the humanities, saying that "… an education in the humanities allows one to develop skills in reading, writing, reflection, and interpretation that are highly prized…. [We also] teach a set of skills, or an attitude, in the humanities … the set of skills that usually goes under the rubric of critical thinking."

To assess the extent to which students are developing these skills within a particular major requires honing in on which outcomes are most applicable to the discipline, and then identifying an appropriate way to observe them in students. Once one sets out to determine whether a type of learning has taken place, how students are asked to demonstrate that learning matters a great deal, and I contend that the method chosen should take into account disciplinary training. For example, it may be the case that students in the humanities have processes for thinking critically that best lend themselves to working on problems in those disciplines. It is also very likely that students will draw on their specific curricular training to demonstrate their cognitive abilities when asked to do so. It would follow that attempts to evaluate critical thinking outcomes for these students with assessments lacking humanities content would result in a good deal of measurement error. An effort to assess the critical thinking ability of humanities students that does not include an opportunity for them to draw on the reading, writing, reflection, and interpretation skills they cultivate in their majors will not provide the best forum to deeply engage their thinking and reasoning abilities. The resulting observation and measurement of these abilities would be weakened.

While there is no shortage of assessment instruments readily available that target specific and general learning outcomes, none uses the discipline as the starting point for testing broad learning goals of college.[5] Rather, the assessment tools fall into one of two categories. When general learning outcomes are the target of the assessment, student disciplinary concentrations are ignored, and the tool is considered "content-neutral." Questions in the assessment try to uniformly measure the overall contribution of four or more years of college to students' cognitive or skill-based abilities. Thus, the assessments to test reasoning and thinking with essay questions about a contemporary social issue, for example, or standardized multiple choice questions. When assessments are designed to address disciplines, they target content-specific disciplinary knowledge, not general learning outcomes such as reasoning abilities. These standardized, subject-specific tests measure what students have learned about their discipline through courses in their major. So, definitions of key disciplinary terms or scientific principles are included as questions in such assessments. Yet a third way of thinking about assessment is possible—one that draws on disciplinary approaches and methods of learning while targeting general learning outcomes. This type of assessment, which is rooted *in* a discipline, but is not designed to be an assessment *of* disciplinary content, has the potential to avoid many of the limitations described above, and can be employed by faculty with an interest in better understanding the learning that takes place in their courses and departments.

An Example: Assessing Thinking and Reasoning for Classics and Political Science

I began a project in 2007 to assess general learning outcomes in two disciplines, political science and classics. This multi-institutional study seeks to examine and document the development of general learning outcomes using tools that draw from disciplinary learning but do not measure disciplinary content. Because the discipline is central to the focus of this research, faculty involvement has been key to: 1) identifying appropriate outcomes for investigation; 2) devising the instrumentation; 3) creating scoring rubrics for the assessment; 4) supervising the grading of components of the assessment; 5) identifying appropriate samples of majors within each participating institution; and 6) recruiting students to participate in the study.

To begin this work, faculty from all participating institutions formed a collaborative, multi-institutional, cross-disciplinary consortium that included me and my research team. Using the discipline of classics as a case study, the study started with a small group of faculty from five institutions who were asked to identify broad cognitive outcomes cultivated in training within classics. We then zeroed in on a few specific outcomes and began developing instrumentation for their measurement. In its focus on broader cognitive abilities, such as critical thinking, the project strove to avoid testing for content-based, domain-specific knowledge.

Ultimately faculty in both classics and political science developed essay questions to test for critical thinking abilities. Essay questions were considered appropriate means by which students in these disciplines could demonstrate their critical thinking abilities, since the reading and writing of essays, books, and articles are principle ways in which knowledge is gained and communicated in these disciplines. The questions drew on content from their disciplines but did not require extensive discipline-based knowledge to answer. For example, classics students were asked to consider pictures of artifacts from an archaeological dig as a basis for drawing conclusions about an unknown civilization. Political science students were asked to make inferences about the political and governmental conditions in a fictional country that were supported by newspaper and magazine clips they received.

The essay questions were pre-tested on a group of majors and non-majors and revised for clarity and precision. The resulting assessment was administered to approximately 1,000 first- and second-year college students at a dozen institutions. We will be reassessing these students in their fourth year to observe the amount of change in thinking and reasoning that takes place in students of different majors, with special attention to classics and political science. Scoring rubrics were also devised by the faculty to grade the essays, and were tested and revised to ensure they could measure general critical thinking abilities and not disciplinary knowledge. Ultimately, scores using these rubrics designed for the specific essay questions correlated well with a "generic" critical thinking rubric that could be used to score any essay (Facione and Facione 1994).[6]

Despite frequent references in the higher education literature to faculty disengagment with assessment work (Palomba and Banta, *Assessment Essentials*; Bok),

faculty participation in this project continues to be both strong and easy to obtain. The perceived *authenticity* of the assessment research likely contributed to faculty enthusiasm. That is, it is work that is conceived through collaboration, grounded within a discipline, administered locally rather than as part of a large national study, and reported on with the objective of aiding faculty in better understanding the impact of their pedagogical and curricular choices.[7]

Its scholarly significance lies not just in the specific findings of undergraduate cognitive ability available from the assessment, but also in the methodological approach to the measurement of broad cognitive outcomes through disciplinary content, and in the successful operationalization of that method with deep and broad involvement of faculty with no prior experience with this form of assessment. Assessment studies that offer an authentic experience for faculty members can be highly successful, despite the challenges of conducting assessment in colleges and universities, which must operate within the complex social and cultural ecologies of higher education. This study explicitly addresses the role of the disciplinary major—too often seen as a "confounding" variable in an assessment of broad cognitive outcomes—in the development of critical thinking, and does so with a method that calls upon faculty in those disciplines to think carefully and explicitly about the contribution of their disciplines to generalizable, lifelong learning outcomes.

Conclusion: Faculty Participation is Essential

Assessment projects of this sort have much to offer faculty who are ready to investigate the teaching and learning taking place in their disciplines. Likewise, as stewards of their disciplines, all faculty members have something to offer assessment projects when questions of their students' learning outcomes are at hand. This work comes down to questions about how best to educate students in college, which ultimately must be answered by faculty. Derek Bok reminds us that "… faculties and their academic leaders have considerable freedom to shape undergraduate education and to teach their students as they choose. The manner in which they exercise their discretion and the values and attitudes they bring to the task have much to do with the quality of education students receive" (34).

Unfortunately, as Susan Engel observes in her discussion about the role of teaching in college students' success, there are few support structures upon which faculty can anchor efforts to assess their teaching and their students' learning. She writes:

> Good teaching is essential to good colleges. And while our colleges and universities vary greatly in how much they value teaching, even the ones who care about it most do little to make sure it happens. Individual teachers must articulate, and constantly reconsider and reconfirm their educational goals, using those goals as a guide to evaluating their teaching, day in and day out. (194)

But unlike much of the work done by faculty in academia, this need not be a purely solitary effort. When disciplines come to the forefront, colleagues can be found both inside and outside one's institution. Conversations turn to questions of what matters most to a discipline, and such discussions can be among the most rewarding for those who have dedicated their careers to furthering its intellectual goals.

Thank you to William Hayward for his thoughtful comments on an earlier draft.

NOTES

1   Note that discipline-based assessment is much less relevant for those institutions and individuals whose primary concern is the early learning that takes place in students' first or second college year, when most have not yet declared a major. Also, it is irrelevant for two-year colleges and those institutions with low graduation or retention rates. It is *most* applicable to those interested in overall collegiate outcomes, sometimes known as the "value added" of a college education.

2   Light, Cox, and Calkins extend the examination of higher education's context by examining the numerous pressures the larger society exerts on the professoriate in the US, such as globalization and the shift to a knowledge-based economy. They accurately note that these, too, have an impact on teaching, learning, and assessment.

3   I refer here not to courses designed to fulfill a college's writing requirement, usually taken in the first year of college. I mean instead those courses found most often in humanities and social science disciplines which almost exclusively utilize essay exams and/or term papers to establish a student's grade.

4   This is not meant to discount the important efforts faculty make to assess the content learning that takes place in disciplines. Ideally, both general learning outcomes and domain-specific outcomes can be integrated into faculty-driven assessment approaches.

5   See the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement's "Inventory of Higher Education Assessment Instruments" webpage, Borden and Kernal's *Measuring Quality in Higher Education* website, and Schechter's webpage on "Internet Resources for Higher Education Outcomes Assessment" for extensive listings of assessment instruments and methodological approaches.

6   The generic rubric we used was Peter A. Facione and Noreen C. Facione's "Holistic Critical Thinking Scoring Rubric."

7   See also Palomba and Banta, *Assessing Student Competence in Accredited Disciplines*.

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BIOGRAPHY

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WHERE HAS ASSESSMENT BEEN IN THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION? A DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE

ROSEMARY G. FEAL, DAVID LAURENCE, AND STEPHEN OLSEN

MANY PEOPLE IN THE ACADEMIC community expressed surprise when, in 2008, Modern Language Association (MLA) President Gerald Graff wrote an *MLA Newsletter* column that spoke out in favor of assessment. Wasn't assessment the purview of other disciplinary associations, such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), which have had a deep stake in fostering discussions of student learning (how to define, promote, and measure it)? It seems logical that associations with missions centered on the teaching of writing or of language acquisition would devote significant resources to the issue of assessment. Although many members of the MLA offer courses that might not be classified as "writing" or "language" courses *per se*, these faculty members typically teach aspects of writing and language and are used to thinking about how to document student progress. In this brief piece, we want to demonstrate that the MLA has in fact been deeply concerned with matters of assessing student learning and has produced a very useful body of work to support that concern.

The MLA's work on assessment has been undertaken primarily by the Association of Departments of English (ADE) and the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (ADFL), organizations that have been parts of the MLA since the 1960s and whose chief purpose is the exchange of information among departmental administrators. With upwards of 1,500 member departments, ADE and ADFL function as central sources of support for educational programs in English and other modern languages at colleges and universities throughout the United States and Canada. They offer department chairs a community of peers and access to the extensive information resources of the MLA, while providing both departments and the MLA itself invaluable perspectives on how intellectual, curricular, and public policy developments are affecting local programs and the profession nationally. Since the mid-1980s at least, assessment of student learning has been a regular topic for consideration at the summer seminars for department administrators that

ADE and ADFL sponsor each June and the subject of dozens of articles in the *ADE Bulletin* and *ADFL Bulletin*, the associations' journals.

Some background is in order before we discuss the MLA's part in assessment in the fields of English and other languages.[1] Assessment of student learning—and education more broadly—came center stage as a public policy issue of national concern following the release in 1983 of *A Nation at Risk*, the report on the state of American education from then-Secretary of Education Terrell Bell's National Commission on Excellence in Education. Not coincidentally, *A Nation at Risk* circulated in a political context of increasing stress on state and local budgets—stress created in no small part by unfunded mandates that federal legislation imposed on state and local governments and that, as one consequence, cast education, corrections, and Medicaid as competitors for increasingly tightened state and local tax resources. Higher education is generally the largest single pot of discretionary money in a state budget, while corrections and Medicaid are mainly non-discretionary expenditures. As corrections and Medicaid started to claim notably large and alarmingly enlarging shares of state budgets, legislators began to question just what public expenditures on the education portion were purchasing—and to look to assessment as a tool for finding out.

For higher education, the issue emerged most consequentially in the congressional debate surrounding the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 1992, especially Title IV, the part of the legislation dealing with federal student grant and loan programs. The debate that took place during the reauthorization episode of the early 1990s established terms for a public policy discussion that have persisted for two decades and that will be entirely familiar to anyone who is following the arguments today about higher education and the public or publicly subsidized or guaranteed dollars colleges and universities receive in the form of tuition through their participation in Title IV student-aid programs—approximately $113 billion in 2009 (United States, "Federal Student Aid," 5). Then, as now, congressional attention focused primarily on for-profit institutions but tended to implicate the entire system, not-for-profit liberal arts and science institutions as well as for-profit vocational schools and institutes. Then, as now, questions arose about the default rates on student loans, many of which are backed by government guarantees. Then, as now, a basic impetus was to create legislative provisions that would oblige institutions receiving student-loan tuition dollars—a debt burden that often puts the student financially at risk—to document that the educational programs students undertook were actually delivering the education advertised.

The Higher Education Act made institutional accreditation the criterion for institutions' eligibility to participate in Title IV student-aid programs. In the 1992 debate about reauthorization, Congress came close to decoupling eligibility to participate in Title IV programs from accreditation and creating a new and unprecedented system of direct governmental supervision. By agreeing to implement assessment and documentation of student learning outcomes as part of the accreditation process, higher education's voluntary accreditation system succeeded in preserving the tie between accreditation and eligibility for

institutions to participate in Title IV student-aid programs. Ever since, assessment and requests for departmental plans and procedures for documenting student learning outcomes have been visible accompaniments of institutional accreditation reviews.

In the aftermath of the 1992 reauthorization debate and the new commitment to assessment of student learning exacted of higher education's regional accreditation bodies, the ADE appointed an ad hoc committee "to investigate the issues and procedures of assessment in English and to consider what advice the ADE can usefully offer to departments and chairs engaged with the problem of developing assessment initiatives, especially initiatives focused on the documentation of student learning" ("Report of the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Assessment" 1). In 1994 the ad hoc committee surveyed ADE member departments about their assessment practices and experiences, and in 1996 submitted its final report. The "Report of the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Assessment" remains a vital resource for departments undertaking assessment initiatives and offers explicit advice about fostering a culture of evidence for documenting student learning in humanities departments. It provides a political and historical context for the demands being made on English and other humanities departments, reports on the experiences and initiatives of a variety of departments across the country, offers detailed guidance in selecting and presenting evidence, and presents a selection of "Hints, Tips, Words to the Wise, and Other Cautionary Observations." The report advises faculty to think globally and act locally when responding to assessment mandates:

> Assessment indeed takes place in an environment of national economic trends and professional goal setting, but it also inevitably invokes a host of intensely individual institutional concerns—refining relations to original ethnic or religious institutional affiliations, raising issues involving the specific urban or regional populations the institution serves, or prompting attention to unique excellences often fostered over several generations. The most convincing assessment will be generated where these well understood institutional particularities ground the discussion of economic realities and professional aspirations. (6)

Attention to outcomes assessment also informs other ADE reports, such as the 2003 "Report of the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on the English Major," which further articulates the diversity of English as a discipline and an administrative unit.

> A key strength of English as a centerpiece of liberal education has surely been its breadth and adaptability. English departments have been a traditional locus of curricular experimentation, nurturing and then sending out into the world such former fledglings as American studies, African American studies, and women's studies. As John Gerber, a longtime chair at Iowa, wisely observed

more than twenty-five years ago: "English is not a neat, discrete discipline, but a congeries of subject matters that varies from place to place and time to time." (72)

The persistently polymorphous character of curricula and research in languages, literatures, and cultures has implications for how faculty members in English and other language departments think about student learning and are inclined to assess it:

It has never been assumed that studying English [for example] implies a specific course of study and a prescribed set of outcomes, whether outcome is defined as a standard body of knowledge or a standard display of skills. Local departments and faculty members have thrived in a context of broad freedom to determine curricula and course design in the light of local knowledge informed by participation in the wider scholarly community, whose activity continually shapes and reshapes the arguments directing development of the discipline at large. One expects a major in English to acquire and refine skills of analytic reading, writing, and communication, but these skills are largely a by-product of the formal study of language and literature. . . .

In English, certain obvious elements (spelling and punctuation, knowledge of grammatical terminology, names and dates of authors and their works) are easily incorporated as features of an outcomes system. But little more than functional literacy can be tested in this way—and we insist that baccalaureate education amount to a great deal more. Critical judgment, intellectual inventiveness, perspicacity of observation, depth of research, the capacity to draw on a broad range of relevant materials, analytic shrewdness, and originality in making sound connections and distinctions—all are far less amenable to standardized measures. (80)

The 2006 report of the MLA's Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World," demonstrates how sustained reflection about curriculum and learning is concomitant with the useful consideration of student outcomes. The report articulates a new vision of foreign language education whose goal is translingual and transcultural competence achieved through a broad and more coherent curriculum "in which language, culture, and literature are taught as a continuous whole" (3). Among the report's recommendations are that departments "set clear standards of achievement for undergraduate majors in speaking, reading, writing, and comprehension and to develop the programming necessary to meet these standards" and "establish language requirements (or levels of competence) for undergraduate students majoring in fields such as international studies, history, anthropology, music, art history, philosophy, psychology, sociology,

and linguistics, as well as for students preparing for careers in law, medicine, and engineering" (7-8).

The report's articulation of what such standards and competencies might look like in "educated speakers who have deep translingual and transcultural competence" (3) can serve as an example of the complexity and subtlety of actual outcomes in humanistic inquiry:

> One possible model defines transcultural understanding as the ability to comprehend and analyze the cultural narratives that appear in every kind of expressive form—from essays, fiction, poetry, drama, journalism, humor, advertising, political rhetoric, and legal documents to performance, visual forms, and music. According to this model, which we present only as an example, to read a cultural narrative a student should:

> - Achieve enough proficiency in the language to converse with educated native speakers on a level that allows both linguistic exchanges and metalinguistic exchanges (that is, discussion about the language itself).
> - Have a solid command as well as an analytic knowledge of specific metaphors and key terms that inform culture.
> - Understand how a particular background reality is re-established on a daily basis through cultural subsystems such as:

>   - the mass media
>   - literary and artistic works as projection and investigation of a nation's self-understanding
>   - the social and historical narratives in literary texts, artistic works, the legal system, the political system, the educational system, the economic system, and the social welfare system
>   - local instances of major scientific and scholarly paradigms
>   - sports or other leisure activities, the cultural metaphors these have created, and their relation to the national imagination
>   - stereotypes, of both self and others, as they are developed and negotiated through texts
>   - symbols or sites of memory in the broadest sense, including buildings, historical figures, popular heroes, monuments, currency, culture-specific products, literary and artistic canons, landscapes, fashion, and cuisine
>   - major competing traditions such as views of the nation that are secularist or fundamentalist or religious
>   - local historiography. (4-5)

The integration of assessment into the regular cycle of institutional accreditation has led to reflection on good practice for departments and the field across a range of viewpoints from the decidedly skeptical to the warmly evangelical. The Winter 2008 *ADE Bulletin* includes a special section on "Assessment Pro and Con," featuring papers delivered at the 2007 ADE Summer Seminar for Department Chairs. The Fall 2008 *ADFL Bulletin* includes a cluster of articles arguing that the goals of the humanities can be supported by effectively designed assessments of student learning. As of this writing, a search on the category "assessment of student learning" returns a list of 135 articles in the *ADE Bulletin* archive; in the *ADFL Bulletin* archive a search on the term "assessment" returns a list of 54 articles. It is fair to say that faculty members in language and literature have engaged the formal assessment of educational programs through the documentation of student learning outcomes—considered as a systematic departmental practice—with a certain degree of wariness. But engage they have and engaged they are. In preparation for a panel on assessment of student learning in English at the 2010 Summer Seminar East, the ADE surveyed chairs of its member departments about their assessment projects and plans. Not surprisingly, 86% said that their department had implemented an assessment process, and 90% said assessment has the potential to improve student learning in their department's programs ("ADE Survey").

In 2006, the MLA along with other disciplinary groups responded to an invitation from the Teagle Foundation to think about "the relationship between the goals and objectives of undergraduate concentrations in their disciplines and those of liberal education" ("Report to the Teagle Foundation" 1). The report to the Teagle Foundation from the MLA's working group recommended "an approach to structuring baccalaureate programs in English and other languages that combines four constitutional elements"—and goes on to list "a coherent program of study," "teamwork among instructional staff members," "interdepartmental cooperative teaching," and "empirical research to assess the successes and shortcomings of the program" (3). These aspirations toward educational activities that are grounded in programmatic coherence and educational acquisitions that can be empirically documented are no less characteristic of faculties in language and literature; nonetheless, they are perhaps less frequently given public expression than are affirmations of a force in language and literature that maintains uneasy relations with whatever in education can be specified as outcomes. In a famous sentence at the conclusion of "Russian Writers, Censors, and Readers," the opening essay in *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Vladimir Nabokov declares, "Readers are born free and ought to remain free" (12). Nabokov understood the essence of a reader's freedom to consist in the principle that "no director of conscience and no book club"—and, we might add, no scheme of rubrics and outcomes decided by a committee of experts—"can manage [a reader's] soul" (11). If some MLA members maintain a certain characteristic wariness toward outcomes assessment, the wariness may only reflect their deep instinct to preserve and defend the reader's freedom. That is, many of us cling to an awareness that litera-

ture's educative force lies in some measure in its power to teach what freedom is precisely by propelling us into experiences of the reader's freedom. Assessment presents the challenge of meshing or reconciling this instinctive bias for the reader's freedom with the schematic nature of rubrics and outcomes that, defined in advance, would seem of necessity to circumscribe reading and compromise the reader's freedom. But this is perhaps to say no more than that language and literature, and the study and teaching and learning of language and literature, stand in uneasy relationship not just to assessment but to the institution of organized education. An uneasy relationship need not be an unproductive one. Literature and the study, teaching, and learning of language and literature have created an educationally productive arena in the school over a long and distinguished history. The encounter of language and literature with assessment, that relative newcomer on the institutional scene, is doing the same.

NOTES

1   Sources for the history summarized in this paragraph and the two paragraphs following may be found in two *ADE Bulletin* "From the Editor" columns (Laurence [1994] and Laurence [1995]). See also Glidden; Stedman.

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MEASURING THE HUMANITIES: THE SLIPPERY SLOPE FROM ASSESSMENT TO STANDARDIZATION

MICHAEL HOLQUIST

So scheint der komplizierte Auflösungsprozeß, der zur Zerfaserung der äußeren Handlung, zu Bewußteinsspiegelung und Zeitenschichtung führte, nach einer sehr einfachen Lösung zu streben. Vielleicht wird sie allzu einfach sein für diejenigen die unsere Epoche, trotz aller Gefahren und Katastrophen, wegen ihres Lebensreichtums und des unvergleichlichen geschichtlichen Standorts, den sie bietet, bewundern und lieben. Aber das sind nur wenige, und sie werden voraussichtlich von jener Vereinheitlichung, die sich ankündigt, kaum mehr als die ersten Anzeichen erleben.

Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (514)

So the complicated process of dissolution which led to fragmentation of the exterior action, to reflection of consciousness, and to stratification of time seems to be tending toward a very simple solution. Perhaps it will be too simple to please those who, despite all its dangers and catastrophes, admire and love our epoch for the sake of its abundance of life and the incomparable historical vantage point which it affords. But they are few in number, and probably they will not live to see much more than the first forewarnings of the approaching unification and simplification.

Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (553)

TOGETHER WITH CERTAIN TREES, such as California's giant Redwoods, universities are among Earth's oldest living things. The conceptual shape of universities has, of course, undergone enormous changes since their founding. If we take 1088 as the year of the institution's origin[1]—when the

term "university" was first used in founding a new kind of school ("*universitas magistrorum et scholarium*") in Bologna—the academies we now so ruefully inhabit go back for a millennium. And while the things called universities evolved differently in different places, over the centuries there has been relative agreement about the nature of their task. They are seen as the final step in organized education, the last opportunity cultures have to shape their future through systematic learning. As such, they have always been sites for disputes about the present and future course of the civilizations in which they operate.

Revolutionary shifts in the history of the university as an institution are thus chartable according to the crises that gave them rise. This brief essay is not the place to dwell on the periods of greatest transformation; suffice it to remember such relatively recent events as Napoleon's defeat of Prussia in 1806, leading to the von Stein reforms and the founding of Wilhelm von Humboldt's University of Berlin in 1810.[2] Closer to home, consider the end of the War of Independence in 1789, and the debates that followed about what a distinctively American education should be, culminating in the Yale Report of 1828, the Morrill Act of 1862, and President Eliot's reforms at Harvard in the 1880s. After World War II, the several factors that produced a boom in higher education in the United States—pre-eminently the GI Bill—led to extraordinary changes in the American university. In the thirty years from 1945 to 1975, the number of undergraduate students in the United States increased by 500%, and graduate students by 900%, a demographic tsunami whose full effects we still do not fully grasp (Menand 144).

Even more recently, enormous changes have swept through the most ancient of university systems as part of the effort to form a unified Europe following the end of World War II. Margaret Thatcher's *Kulturkampf* against Oxford and Cambridge during the 1990s transformed higher education in the United Kingdom. And on the continent, "The Sorbonne Declaration" of 1998 (signed by ministers from four European nations on the occasion of that university's 800th anniversary) sought sweeping changes. A year later, even more radical reform was called for in a document that was signed by twenty-nine European ministers of education (called by them—no doubt wishing to bask in the authority of Europe's oldest university—"The Bologna Declaration"). As of 2009, when its various national administrators met in Leuven, the Bologna program had grown even larger: it now includes forty-six nations (Council of Europe).

Along with many others, then, I believe that in the first decades of the twenty-first century, global higher education is experiencing yet another revolution. It is one that shares certain structural similarities with past upheavals, but that has as well distinctive features of its own. Some of these portend even greater changes in the not too distant future. The current drive to institutionalize outcome assessments of various kinds in higher education is one of the more significant indicators of change at the moment. In this paper I seek to understand some of the unique implications of assessment in the humanities—particularly in the study of literature—as these relate to the institution of the university.

While different *kinds* of crisis lay behind the many past transformations of

the university here and abroad,[3] these upheavals nevertheless had several features in common. They were first of all organized around different attempts to improve education, of course: a teleological red thread runs through all these arguments, organized as they are around the same question: "What is education *for*?" While there were differing views on this question going back to antiquity, beginning in the seventeenth century two opinions about the university's mission crystallized as the polar extremes defining the debate—and they still do. The first comprised those who argued for a direct, seamless connection between what universities teach and the specific careers that students enter immediately after graduation. That faction was opposed by another; its argument was that the university is a place where character and intellect are shaped in such a way that students attain the discipline and intellectual habits of inquiry required to be successful no matter *what* career they embark upon.

To clarify and give some depth to the arguments of these two factions, I begin by invoking Kant's diatribe against the University of Königsberg in 1796, which provides a particularly clear definition of both sides. Kant's attack on his own university (where he not only taught, but served in 1786 as its *Rektor*) was directed against its medieval organization into Higher and Lower Faculties. Underlying Kant's criticisms was a radical new conception of the human subject, one that required a novel kind of education. Wildly oversimplified, it might be said that for Kant, a reasoning person was a subject who constantly strove for autonomy in the face of society's heteronomous claims on his individual character.

In order to be a morally, as well as intellectually responsible and independently reasoning individual, the Kantian subject needed to develop the capacity for making his own critical judgments. Kant had argued in his three Critiques that thinking itself was essentially the capacity to make judgments (*Urteilskraft*). *Criticism*, understood as the mind's activity in making judgments, was the very matrix of his whole system. Kant's quarrel with the university in 1796/8 was a practical application of metaphysical ideas he had proposed at least as early as 1781 in *The Critique of Pure Reason*. His argument for university reform might be summed up as follows: higher education (as constituted in the late eighteenth century) failed to foster the autonomy needed by students if they were to exercise the faculty of judgment they required to become responsible moral and intellectual agents.

Specifically, Königsberg was organized into a Lower Faculty that taught general subjects (history, philosophy, mathematics, and some science), and a Higher Faculty comprised of three professional schools in theology, law, and medicine. In drawing a distinction between the Lower and Higher Faculties, Kant pointed to the emphasis on training to *think* that characterized the former and the stress on training for specific tasks in *employment* fostered in the latter. Kant argued that something was *missing* in the schools whose primary mission was to train people for jobs in the world outside the university: they all avoided foundational inquiry—not least of all about the very specialties they were teaching. However, as Kant saw it, this was as it should be: lawyers need to have confidence in the law, doctors to have competence in medicine, and

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preachers should have faith in their doctrine. The state was correct to suppress any radical questioning of doxa in training for these professions, given the nature of the essentially vocational task with which they were charged. Such adherence to already available, practical knowledge was appropriate for what Kant somewhat maliciously termed "the businessmen (*Geschäftsleute*)" of the higher faculties.[4]

But the Lower or Philosophical Faculty, Kant argued, had a different mission: its task was ultimately to acquaint students with rational knowledge (*reine Vernunfterkenntnisse*) such as mathematics and philosophy, the metaphysics of nature and morals. Most significantly, the Philosophical Faculty studied the relation of metaphysical questions to the demands of everyday life, including the practical concerns of the professional schools. Thus, the Lower Faculty "extends to all parts of human knowledge" and can do so because it does not treat the subjects it studies as "its own content, but as objects it will examine and criticize for the benefit of the sciences" (*Conflict* 28).

In practice, this meant not accepting at face value claims the current state of knowledge took as self-evident. As Kant famously put it in the Preface to the first edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, "Our age is the genuine age of criticism, to which everything must submit" (100-101). And he specifically isolates Religion and Law as legitimate targets of such criticism:

> Religion through its holiness and legislation through its majesty commonly seek to exempt themselves from [criticism]. But in this way they excite a just suspicion against themselves, and cannot lay claim to that unfeigned respect that reason grants only to that which has been able to withstand its free and public examination. (100-101)

Fast forwarding to the present, my argument is that the university is once again best understood as a site of contest between the forces Kant contrasted as the Higher and Lower Faculties. Today it is the humanities that undertake the task Kant ascribed to the Philosophical Faculty. Understood as the liberal arts, their scope is pretty much what it was in Kant's time. By contrast, the slot formerly held by the Higher Faculty[5] has greatly expanded to include the various subjects that now claim the most students and funds: finance, economics, accounting, technology, and the softer social sciences. Many objections could be made to this admittedly over-simplified equation of the humanities with Kant's Philosophical Faculty. My reason for nevertheless doing so is the conviction that both the Lower Faculty at Königsberg and the humanities in twenty-first-century American universities face much the same kind of threat to their capacity to exercise criticism across the boards.

Kant's conception of criticism was all encompassing; in his lifetime he was not known as the "All-crusher" (*der Alleszermalmer*) for nothing (Kuehn 246). Thus any criticism of his focus on criticism must perforce fall into the category of meta-criticism. For enemies of such radical questioning, such as the Prussian state, the safest tactic for combating criticism *critically* was simply to

declare an arbitrary end to the process, a kind of Schmitt-ian state of emergency in political logic. Which is precisely what happened when Friedrich Wilhelm II invoked censorship to counter Kant's arguments.

The situation is much more complicated, but no less threatening, in the twenty-first century. The divide between those who now hold the ideals Kant championed in the late Enlightenment and those who represent the values of the professional schools yawns even wider in our own day. Humanists, for the most part, continue to espouse the ideal of autonomy and cultivation of the individual person. Moreover, they continue to advance many of the same arguments put forward by Kant and von Humboldt. Crudely put, one might say they champion refinement (or better, *Bildung*) of the student in preparation for the unpredictable trials of life, as opposed to training the student for a particular job. Martha Nussbaum has been a compelling voice for this point of view, maintaining that a democracy is unthinkable without such training.[6] Steeped in the Greek classics, she goes back to fifth-century Athens to demonstrate that issues currently troubling us arose a long time before the university appears as an institution. Her argument is subtle, but Socrates' searingly direct mandate to "know thyself" is still at its heart.

It has frequently been pointed out that Socrates' high-minded insistence on self-cultivation often devolved in practice into a tool of class privilege. Nussbaum counters such charges by invoking a variation on American exceptionalism to insist that such has not been the case in the United States: "From early on, leading US educators connected the liberal arts to the preparation of informed, independent, and sympathetic democratic citizens" ("Skills for Life," 15). The many radical innovations that came into being during the career of Charles William Eliot as President of Harvard University for forty years (1869-1909) may serve as a paradigm of the American attempt to use the liberal arts as a means of educating citizens for participation in a democratic society.[7] In the years following the Civil War, Eliot succeeded in opening Harvard to a broader population of students by abolishing the requirement that incoming students know Greek, introducing the elective system, and always insisting on the liberal arts as a major element in higher education. He specifically encouraged the study of languages, literature, history and philosophy.[8]

How well his dream of the transformative power of a liberal education triumphed may be judged by the resurgence of the powers that emerged to oppose the classical liberal arts. A populist argument for vocational training emerged during the very years that Eliot was effecting his changes in the name of a people's democracy at Harvard. Further south, Yale University's philosophy of liberal arts education faced legal challenges brought by an association of yeoman farmers. It is a little known fact that when the Morrill Act became law in 1862, Yale—along with such other institutions as Iowa State University and Kansas State University—was among the very first six schools to benefit from it. That legislation was part of the American attempt to democratize the university by donating public lands to support, and in the words of the bill, "to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts" (Morrill Act). Unlike most other schools that benefited from

the Morrill Act, Yale had no farm. Nevertheless, it was the logical choice to become Connecticut's designated land-grant institution, since there was no public university in the state in 1862. Further, unlikely as it now may sound, Yale in the mid-nineteenth century was a national leader in agricultural studies. Sheffield, Yale's scientific school, had already appointed this country's first professor of the subject in 1846, and fourteen years later organized a national conference on agriculture that attracted 500 attendees and lasted a full month. The conference was widely covered by the national press.

But you could see that trouble was already brewing for Yale. The *New York Times* reported its pleasure at the event, adding "We hope to see not only Yale, but all our colleges turning a portion of their attention from the languages of nations who have long since passed away, and directing it more to those truths of science" (qtd. in Schiff). In its coverage, *Scientific American* made the language/science antagonism even more explicit: "To see Yale college stepping out from among the mists of antiquity and the graves of dead languages, and 'taking up the shovel and the hoe,' is certainly one of the signs of the times" (qtd. in Schiff).

The binary opposition of bad old languages vs. good new science reflected in these articles did not fail to resonate with many Connecticut citizens. They felt Yale had not gone quite far enough to step out of the graves of dead languages. Among these were members of the very powerful National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry, a union of farmers then organizing across the country. They played a key role in the years after the Civil War, one difficult now to imagine in national and state politics. They resented what they called a "classical college" like Yale benefiting from the public largesse of the Morrill Act. It especially galled them that the three-year curriculum of the Sheffield degree in agriculture placed heavy emphasis on not just dead languages from the mists of antiquity, but such modern languages as French and German. A Yale report on the agricultural school in 1865 stressed that "the educated farmer should read [these languages] with ease" (qtd in Schiff).

The Grange lobbied tirelessly, and in 1887 the Connecticut General Assembly voted to transfer its land-grant money to a state-run agricultural school. The Storrs Agricultural Station was established in western Connecticut, later to become the University of Connecticut. In the age of such agribusiness giants as Cargill and Monsanto, it would be easy to dismiss the views—and the political power—of nineteenth-century yeomen farmers as aberrations of our history. But the opposition the nineteenth-century Granges represented to "classical colleges" is rooted very deeply in American soil, and resistance to language study is still very much part of the American landscape.[9]

The conflict between the humanities and their more pragmatically oriented opponents has in the last twenty years taken on a new urgency. This radical shift in the debate is illustrated with frightening lucidity in reforms that have been introduced in the United Kingdom. Because major funding for universities there comes from the government, you can see a process unfolding more slowly in the US with a clarity found only in governmental decrees. For the last twenty years, British universities have received funds through government-

administered Research Assessment Exercises (RAE). Under RAE, every five years universities submit requests for funding that are essentially competitive grant applications. Requests for funding must be supported by elaborate data that list faculty accomplishment, measures taken to improve the "research environment," evidence of the esteem in which the university is held in the great world, and a number of other details. After review by panels of senior academics (sometimes including American specialists[10]), scores are assigned and more or less money is provided to the competing institutions depending on the rating they have been assigned.

Expensive, time consuming, open to manipulation and error as this procedure was, it had at least a patina of legitimacy derived from the role of the academic panels that assigned the scores. In the latest version of the review, it appears that the role of these academic panels has been reduced. There has been widespread questioning of the system over the years, culminating in the late Labor government's decision to reform it.[11] This is still being worked out, and is complicated by Labor's loss of the recent general election in the UK,[12] but what seems to be emerging is a process still based on data concerning publications by staff, research environment, etc., although the whole process has been given a new name: Research Excellence Framework (REF). Most notable among changes that have been introduced is a whole new category of competition under the label "influence." The creation of this arcane category becomes more understandable if you keep in mind that the Labor government transferred responsibility for higher education to the Orwellian sounding "Department of Business, Innovation, and Skills."[13]

Not only are university programs to be judged in future on the murky criterion of "influence," but *a full 25%* of the final score—on which their funding for the next five years depends—will be based on it. The document announcing this change contains

> a "menu" of "impact indicators" that will be accepted: it runs to thirty-seven bullet points. Nearly all of these refer to "creating new businesses", "commercialising new products or processes", attracting "R&D investment from global business", informing "public policy-making" or improving "public services", improving "patient care or health outcomes", and improving "social welfare, social cohesion or national security".… Only five of the thirty-seven bullet points are grouped under the heading "Cultural Enrichment". These include such things as "increased levels of public engagement with science and research (for example, as measured by surveys)" and "changes to public attitudes to science (for example, as measured by surveys)." The final bullet point is headed "Other quality of life benefits": in this case, uniquely, no examples are provided. The one line under this heading simply says, "Please suggest what might also be included in this list." (Collini)

It is clear, from language used in the document, that the government expects that the criteria for judging any given university's "impact" should be uniform across disciplines. Whether they give degrees in science, business, or humanities, programs must adhere to the same definition of what constitutes their relevance. The framers of this policy conceive "impact" as defined by results that are "closer to the market" (qtd. in Collini). Keith Thomas has recently called attention to a document entitled *A Vision for Research*, in which the Prime Minister's Council for Science and Technology recommended that "universities should seek to professionalize their capabilities and structures … so that they operate more like consultancy organizations" (13). A memorandum from King's College London makes clear at the level where the rubber meets the road just what this means: due to financial exigency, it is necessary to "create financially viable academic activity by disinvesting from areas that are at subcritical level" (qtd. in Thomas 13).

It is, of course, the humanities that administrators who publish such memoranda have in mind when they inveigh against "areas that are at subcritical level," and British universities have seen spectacular declines in literature, history, and foreign languages. At King's College London, "arts and humanities faculty … are being forced to reapply for their jobs. When the evaluation is finished, around twenty-two of them will have been voted off the island" (Grafton 32).

I have concentrated on what is happening to the humanities in the UK because the global profile of the threat facing the humanities—and pre-eminently literary scholarship—is harder-edged and easier to see there than it is here in the US. The situation in the rest of the world is equally loaded in favor of practical training—what is called STEM education (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), as anyone who has visited Chinese, Japanese, or Indian universities is aware.[14] And as Keith Thomas has recently reminded us, the highly influential Shanghai Jiao Tong world ranking of Universities "is based on criteria which take no account of the humanities at all" (15).

The European continent—where the vision of the humanities arose that shaped the liberal arts in the United States—is currently convulsed with rolling waves of change and displacement in its universities. The Bologna Process has spread like a plague, to the consternation of students who now make *less* use than ever of the admirable ERASMUS program designed to ease transfer of credits between national university systems. In a recent poll, only four percent of European undergraduates took advantage of ERASMUS (cited in Adelman, *Bologna Process* xxii). In Germany last year, under banners bearing quotations from Goethe (*Nicht Amboss, sondern Hammer sein* [Be the hammer, not the anvil]), tens of thousands of students marched, rallied, and mounted protest sleep-ins in over fifty cities to dramatize their resistance to the Bologna reforms.[15]

German professors have been particularly vocal in their rejection of the Bologna Process. In 2009, the distinguished theologian Marius Reiser resigned from his post as Professor at the Gutenberg University in Mainz to protest the reforms.[16] And Julian Nida-Rümelin, an eminent political scientist at the

Scholl Institut of Munich University and former Minister for Cultural Affairs under Gerhard Schroeder,[17] has repeatedly spoken out against the Bologna Process. The main objections to the Bologna Process include the infantilizing effects of the reforms (they turn universities into secondary schools); the perverse negative effect on student mobility of standardizing curricula across Europe;[18] and the time wasted by students memorizing texts (hardly any time remains for studying alone). At least in the humanities, "this is—to put it mildly—regrettable" (Nida-Rümelin, *Bologna Process*). Or, put another way, "… the Bologna Process is all about teaching of skills [*Kenntnis*]—in other words about giving students basic knowledge and an overview of a subject. Everything is aimed at vocational training, universities providing skills that students will later need in their jobs" (Reiser).

Looming over these criticisms is the shadow of the systemic feature that is meant to be the force able to insure standardization across national borders. I mean of course the enormous mechanism of assessment procedures required to guarantee the sameness of outcomes across 46 countries, over 4,000 universities, and 16 million students speaking 23 languages in the 27 countries of the European Union alone (Jaschik, "Tuning"). From the outset, the Bologna Process has wrestled with increasingly elaborate schemes of assessment in order to address the problem of how to homogenize such multifarious parts. And those parts are more disparate than is usually supposed: contrary to popular belief (in the US, at least), the Bologna Process is not merely a European phenomenon: it does indeed include members of the European Union, but it now also comprises such outliers as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Georgia. With the spread of the system, the problem of how to achieve outcomes that can be meaningfully compared continues to grow. As one official of the Bologna Process officials said to me, "It's like herding cats!"[19]

I invoke the Bologna Process because it brings into highest relief the connection between *assessment* and *standardization*. That is its utility for Americans: you can see an aspect of assessment that is frequently overlooked in the less hegemonic attempts to promote outcomes assessment in US universities. In most American discussions, standardization—a constantly lurking danger in any assessment program—frequently gets downplayed or goes unacknowledged. It is often dismissed as an aberrant effect of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) agenda that has had disastrous results for American primary and secondary schools,[20] and thus not a matter of concern for professors in higher education. I believe this is naïve. It is not just parents who must mortgage their homes to pay ever-rising tuition fees who wish to see what they are getting for their money. There is no reason to believe that the forces inside government, big business, and the extreme populist/authoritarian segment of the population at large who spearheaded NCLB will fail to see the historical independence of the American university as a potential danger or non-systemic affront to economic rationalization.

Gerald Graff has famously written that "Assessment Changes Everything," and indeed it does—especially during a financial crisis. Some of the things that get changed in the push to introduce assessment procedures in American

higher education are relations between universities and state and federal governments. I suspect one reason assessment's inevitable effect of standardization has played a less prominent role here than it has in Europe is the comforting assumption many US academics make that such reviews would be exclusively peer reviews, designed and administered by those to be assessed. That is, many American academics think that, unlike Europe, where provincial and national governments run the universities and thus oversee their assessment, the idiosyncratic American tradition of private colleges and universities would insure that assessment will be equally autonomous. And up to this point, the most far reaching attempts to introduce assessment have been the creation of academics themselves, as in the admirable program instituted by the office of academic planning and assessment at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst[21] and many other places.

However, there are those here at home in the United States who seek to expand the reach of assessment into a much more far-reaching system. At the January 2009 meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), two national education campaigns were announced, both of which effectively work to intensify and standardize assessment in US higher education. I wish to make very clear that neither of these organizations has an official, governmental status. But they are now the most active proponents of assessment on a broader scale than has been traditional in American higher education. A National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was initiated to "assess assessment" at that January meeting. The creation of a New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability was also announced (Jaschik, "Assessing").[22] The impulse behind these moves—and many others of the sort—is best summed up as "the best defense is offense." As Molly Corbett Broad, president of the American Council on Education, put it at the AAC&U meeting, higher education in the US "cannot be playing defense. That is the message of the day" (qtd. in Jaschik).

And the two new organizations that sprang into being on that occasion appear to be well advanced in their activity. NILOA has prepared a questionnaire seeking information on current assessment practices and distributed it to the presidents of every two-year and four-year college and university in the country. Furthermore, conferences have been organized, attended by officials from Minnesota, Indiana, and Utah, to discuss the merits of the Bologna Process.

What I find somewhat unsettling is that these groups frequently work with two others, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), and the Lumina Foundation. Both of these think tanks (and funding sources) have been pushing the Bologna Process as a model for Americans to follow. They have been spurred by Clifford Adelman's white paper, *The Bologna Process for U.S. Eyes: Re-Learning Higher Education in the Age of Convergence*. Arguing from a militantly globalist perspective, Adelman (who before joining IHEP worked at the US Department of Education for over thirty years), is trying to wake America up. With Lumina Foundation support, he is currently directing IHEP's "global performance" project, for which his glowing version of the Bologna process

was prepared, and which also sponsored an earlier paper of his, *Learning Accountability from Bologna: A Higher Education Policy*. Adelman makes no bones about the fact that he considers the voluntarist efforts of American colleges and universities to be virtually useless, making clear that he strives for a system like Europe's much more far-reaching and centrally organized system:

> The "voluntary system of accountability" adopted by a large seg-
> ment of higher education—which tells the public how many
> pieces of paper colleges and universities handed out (to whom
> and when), how much students liked different aspects of their
> experience at an institution, and how much scores on tests of
> something called "critical thinking" improved for a sample of stu-
> dents between entrance and senior year—is more show than sub-
> stance. (*Learning Accountability* 1)

In Adelman's account, the United States is portrayed as lagging behind the rest of the world because Americans do not pay enough attention to develop-ments overseas: "Former Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings' Commission on the Future of Higher Education paid no attention whatsoever to Bologna, and neither did the U.S. higher education community in its under-whelming response to that Commission's report. Such purblind stances are unforgivable in a world without borders" (*Bologna Process* viii). Now, he surely is right about US ignorance of what is happening in higher education in the rest of the world. But it does not follow that we should therefore do more to inform ourselves *in order* to imitate programs that have yet to prove themselves in Europe, such as the Bologna Process. As the data I have cited above make clear, there has been widespread controversy, to say the least, over the worth of that process from both European students and professors, while its strongest propo-nents have been governmental functionaries in every nation where it has been implemented. And anyone who has read Diane Ravitch's last book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*, will find Adelman's use of the term "accountability" chilling.

I, too, deplore American ignorance about changes in university educa-tion across the world. With regard specifically to the Bologna Process, it seems to me that, far from being a model, Americans might well see Bologna as a warning about what might happen here. I have not (yet) found examples quite as egregious as those I have cited in Germany and the UK,[23] but every-where across the United States there is an increasing pressure to do what the Europeans already have done: one, to downsize the same amount of learning into a shorter period of time (a three-year BA)[24]; and two, to sacrifice all other goals in the service of standardized outcomes across the board, no mat-ter what the effect might be on different areas of scholarship, university sys-tems, or individual students and professors—the humans who are the subject of the humanities.

National economic growth has replaced nationalism as the force organiz-ing universities in the twenty-first century.[25] This is only one effect of a more

universal mercantilism, but since universities continue to be the pinnacle of any education system that has them, the commercialization of higher education will have more far-reaching effects in them than in other areas of our civilization.

Since this is the case, it is not unreasonable to expect that every academic specialty be able to give some account of itself. After so much is granted, however, there are several questions that still need to be answered: what is the nature of that account to be; who should provide it; to whom should it be addressed; and who should evaluate it?

If the common sense program for which Gerald Graff has become a prominent spokesman were to be the furthest extent of any future assessment program, one might have little reason to fear the future. He essentially asks for more interaction between colleagues so as to rationalize the curriculum, thus giving students an education that is progressive, beginning at a lucid A and ending at a coherent Z. Departments should critically examine their joint offerings as a joint structure with an Aristotelian beginning, middle and end. Although most of us remember most vividly the odd course from our youth taught by a colorful eccentric, no system can afford too many of these. Who would disagree with Graff's call for more cooperation among colleagues and his opposition to patchwork programs of stand-alone courses that are merely monuments to the pedagogical dervishes who teach them? Clearly, for colleagues to gather and compare notes on the way each is contributing to a common goal that has been established for their degree is a good thing, and can actually enhance collegiality if organized properly. This is a dialogue we should have been having all along.

But beyond these workaday measures aimed at improving the curriculum so as to give students a clear, graduated sense of the particular sector of knowledge we profess looms a steep and slippery slope. There, a host of issues awaits us that raise serious questions about the applicable scope of assessment. Consider: assessment of any kind is essentially a judgment—it has the same root as *assizes*—with at least two necessary components: the thing to be assessed, and the scale that will be used to assess that thing. For assessment to work, there must be a fit between these two elements: you cannot measure time with a ruler, or space with a clock. So we must ask: what is the proper instrument and what is the correct unit of measurement appropriate to assess courses in the humanities?

No one yet has come up with compelling answers to these questions. It seems evident that—if we are not bent by the winds of insane standardization[26] that sweep through the Bologna universe—we must resist attempts to measure what we do when we teach Proust or Dostoevsky through glorified time and motion studies calibrated to encourage ever greater "impact" ratings. Such controls are still mostly a future threat in the United States, but at a time when influential forces here at home are holding Bologna up as a model to be imitated, we should heed the warnings coming from Europe where they are the norm. This is not xenophobia. As I tried to indicate earlier, Europeans themselves—including those tasked with implementing the reforms—have raised questions about what they are doing. In May 2010, the European

University Association itself published a white paper entitled *Impact of the Economic Crisis on European Universities*, which concludes with a warning:

> Finally, there are indications that the economic crisis has also had an impact on the development of institutional autonomy. Where authorities resort to direct steering mechanisms, regulations and increasingly unbalanced accountability procedures, there will be counterproductive effects, preventing universities to fully act as an essential player in overcoming the crisis. (4-5)

The same economic crisis impelling reform in Europe has lent the campaign for assessment in higher education new weight and urgency in the US. And, as in Europe, when administrators are faced with the need to make budget cuts, the first areas affected are always in the humanities, and particularly in foreign languages. Elimination of such programs has become so common a feature on our horizon that even concerned members of the Modern Language Association (MLA) now hardly take notice when yet another department bites the dust. Items such as the following are weekly to be found: "This is not an easy time for foreign-language departments. Programs at California State University at Fullerton and the University of Maine at Orono, to name two, were recently shrunk, and decisions about the fate of some language programs at the University of Nevada at Reno and University of Tennessee at Knoxville are pending" (Miller, "Foreign-Language").

Such closures are not only sad; they contain an irony and a warning. The irony is this: of all the disciplines in the humanities, none has done more than the foreign languages to—voluntarily—introduce assessment procedures. Their track record is a model of establishing—and tracking—norms. Of all humanistic disciplines, foreign language departments come closest—and have done so before the issue was recently politicized—to meeting the expectations of assessment enthusiasts.

There are many who argue that if humanities departments just came up with their own assessment procedures, they would be spared having norms imposed on them from outside. Against this premise stands the lugubrious history of foreign language departments in this country: it is precisely they who historically have given the strongest support to assessment that are now among the most endangered.

Twenty-five years ago, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) introduced a program of Certified Proficiency Testing that accurately assesses any subject's ability in many languages (65 tests for oral proficiency, 12 for written). These assessments are so well designed and transparent that the Department of Defense counts on them. Nevertheless, the lights in foreign language department offices are going out all over the land. It is clear that establishing clear-cut standards on which accurate assessment of student knowledge can be based is not in itself a weapon strong enough to overcome resistance based on brute economics. Unless some way is found to protect foreign language teaching from the blind sword of "impact," this

country is going to lose strength in the very sinews of that globalism now so universally embraced as a value—the languages in which others think and conduct their emotional lives.

The situation becomes more involved when we introduce literature courses into the equation of relevancy. For all the good it has done them, foreign language departments can demonstrate they have already done what is being asked of us by assessment enthusiasts. They have been able to do so because a certain testable precision is ineluctably part of what they do: it's either "*amo, amas, amat*" or not, right? *Basic language learning* is a skill acquisition. Learning to speak French in college is similar to other courses in which you learn specific skills: in accounting courses, the books balance or not, right? It is no denigration of basic language teaching—an excruciatingly difficult task performed by dedicated teachers who are experts in their own right—to acknowledge that studying literature is not only not like studying accounting; it is not even like French 101.

In foreign language departments, as in English departments, the classes in which *literature* is taught are engaged in something different from getting students to memorize declensions (although such literature courses do, of course, at the same time add to students' language skills). But what that something else is, is difficult to define in hard-edged terms of a kind that are easily amenable to assessment procedures.

Most will immediately accede to the proposition that what goes on in a literature course is different from what goes on in a first-year language course. But once so much has been said, it is difficult to calibrate further the difference in what is learned in each. What can be said with certainty is that after our first halting steps, whether in our native tongue or one we acquire later in life, language becomes more than a simple skill set as it evolves into the very means by which we think. The language in which we argue with others or meditate in our own minds as we mature becomes something more than the mere knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. It is the fuel that powers the engines of our very minds. And it is language at that mature level that the exercise of reading critically in literature courses fosters and enriches.

In basic language courses one acquires *information*, while in literature courses (no matter in what language) one acquires the habits of critical thinking in the Kantian sense that can—not necessarily, but possibly—lead to what used to be unabashedly called wisdom. When mercantilist critics call for universities to become more like high schools or trade schools, they demonstrate ignorance of possible *levels of knowledge that are not mere information*. The best definition of such information still belongs to Walter Benjamin (who sees it as the kind of knowledge at the other end of the spectrum from *wisdom*):

> The value of information does not survive the moment in which it is new. It lives only in the moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. (90)

Taylorism is dead, but the efficiency expert impulse to measure precise bits of output and impact data is, zombie-like, still very much with us. The demand for such data is beginning to come not just from high-minded, self-motivated faculty and administration in our colleges, nor from foundations such as Lumina, or think tanks such as IHEP. As in Europe, government is stepping into the picture. The state of Texas has long been notorious for its governmental control over what is taught in its primary and secondary schools, but it now has legislated a measure of unique prurience to insure that diktats of the state are obeyed in its colleges and universities. The Texas House and Senate—in a move Governor Rick Perry called a contribution to "consumer protection"—has unanimously enacted a new law that will force everyone involved in higher education in Texas to post on a public website specific, detailed information about their classroom assignments, syllabi, *curricula vitae*, department budgets, and the results of student evaluations. None of the information can be more than three clicks away from the college's home page, and each college or university must have a compliance officer who will send a written report to the governor and legislative leaders every other year.[27]

This law reflects the continuing influence of the former chairman of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, Houston investment consultant Charles Miller, a heavy contributor to the campaigns both of President Bush and Texas governor Rick Perry. While chairing the Commission, Miller flooded its members with a number of "issue papers," some written by himself, and others written by allies, such as Robert C. Dickerson, a former vice president of the Lumina Foundation.[28] One of those papers, written in 2006 (i.e., four years before the Texas law was passed), is an explicit call for oversight of the kind Texas House Bill 2504 succeeded in making a legal requirement. In an "issue paper" entitled *Accountability/Consumer Information*, after calling for information of the type contained in the Bill, Miller writes:

> Any number of excellent consumer shopping sites could serve as models for the revised college search site. While shopping for a postsecondary institution is not exactly the same as shopping for a car, many on-line shopping sites embody extensive flexibility that allows consumers to specify their needs and interests and to compare products that meet criteria set by the consumer. (2)

Texas is, as they say in the Austin state house (modeled on the capitol building in Washington, "but with a higher dome"), something of a maverick among state legislatures. What HB 2504 makes clear is that governmental oversight can trump whatever local efforts of well-meaning faculty at Rice University or the University of Texas might have made to institute their own assessment program. The larger point is that attempts to initiate assessment programs from within the academy should be made, but they should always be made with an eye to the external environment in which they are made.[29]

House Bill 2504 is disturbing not only because it actualizes the possibility that assessment procedures in higher education can be mandated by govern-

ment, as they have been in K–12. The rhetoric surrounding HB 2504—"consumer protection," "on-line shopping," "criteria set by the consumer," etc.—indicates that "while shopping for a postsecondary institution is not exactly the same as shopping for a car," it is similar enough to be cast as a commodity, and like all commodities, it must shape itself to the desires of the market. The obvious lesson to draw from this danger is that we must find ways to go about our task of trying always to improve our work, but must do so guided by the standards of our profession, as well as the prejudices and fashions of the market. Another way to conceive the slippery slope we are on is to see yawning at its bottom the specter of American mercantilism.

What I am saying is that there are two components of assessment that must be given greater attention in our attempts to improve what we offer our students. The first of these is accountability. As Diane Ravitch makes dreadfully clear, assessment can all too easily be conflated with a system of rewards and punishments. If criticism were guided by intellectual goals of Kantian purity, this might not be such a bad thing. Education is inherently not democratic, and when we give grades we all use assessment as a means to discriminate among different levels of quality. But when influential folk like Charles Miller wish to turn education into a commodity whose shape is determined by consumer demand, or when the administrators of King's College London argue that it is necessary to "create financially viable academic activity by disinvesting from areas that are at subcritical level," they are using assessment as a weapon to force education into their unabashedly un-academic vision of what it should be. And by taking the financial bottom line as the academic bottom line they will predictably eliminate idiographic programs in the humanities.

In presenting our assessment designs to administrators at our home campuses, it would be useful to remind them what the world would look like if the capacity for deep reflection at the heart of philosophy, or the possibility of living other lives in fiction in our literature courses were eliminated. And such a lugubrious vision is now harder-edged than ever before. You can see what the commercialization of American higher education would produce in the future if you look at the phenomenon in the present of schools that are not just run *like* businesses, but *are* businesses. I am referring, of course, to the self-confessedly for-profit schools that have sprung up in the last two decades in the United States. For profits now enroll 3.2 million students—11.8 percent of the 27.4 million currently in college (Lederman). The largest of them, the University of Phoenix, has on its 200 campuses (and the Internet) the largest student body of any university in the US: 420,700 undergraduates and 78,000 graduate students ("University of Phoenix"). John Sperling, the billionaire ex-professor from San José State who runs its parent, the Apollo Group, is one of *Forbes* Magazines' richest men in the world. He is quoted as saying the University of Phoenix is "a corporation, not a social entity. Coming here is not a rite of passage. We are not trying to develop … [students'] value systems or go in for that 'expand their minds' bullshit …" (qtd. in Washburn x). This is refreshing. Most of the people who are involved in administration of schools that are officially non-profit would be embarrassed by Sperling's candor. But the University

of Phoenix nevertheless exists as the Platonic idea of the university conceived exclusively as a business enterprise, where fiscal policy trumps academic responsibility: as Sperling says so well, "a corporation not a social entity."

Sperling's candor would be amusing were there not an increasingly precipitous slide on the slippery slope between *for*-profits and *non*-profits. You can see the boundaries shifting in a recent imbroglio involving the august Higher Learning Commission. The Inspector General of the US Department of Education has publicly criticized the work of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, one of the six regional accrediting organizations recognized by the federal government, and the major regional agency accrediting colleges and universities in the upper Midwest, including the University of Michigan and Northwestern University among others. The Education Department's major complaint concerned the oversight agency's leniency toward American Intercontinental University[30] (a for-profit institution). According to the Department of Education, the major entity for evaluating colleges and universities in the upper Midwest had no "'established definition of a credit hour or minimum requirements for program length and the assignment of credit hours,' a situation that could lead to 'inflated credit hours, the improper designation of full-time student status, and the over-awarding' of federal financial grants" (qtd. in "Education Dept."). I note in passing that if the highest level of official institutions charged with assessment of universities cannot agree on "established definitions" of such basics as credit hours, some slack should be given individual departments struggling with the rigors of assessment. But what is most troubling about this news item is that it shows the ability of for-profit universities like American InterContinental University to benefit[31] from decisions made by official agencies also charged with oversight of non-profit schools, some of them very prestigious indeed. Texas proponents of assessment by governmental decree are driven by the idea that an education is simply a commodity; thus it is not surprising that institutions have sprung up that offer degrees that are very little but commodities (and at public expense—the for-profits would go out of business tomorrow without the federal government's annual expenditure of $25 billion in grants and $85 billion in subsidized loans) (Basken).

I adduce the scandal of the for-profits because they represent another version of what the bottom of the slippery slope of assessment looks like. In a better world, there would be a separate agency to accredit for-profit institutions, run, as they are, on principles different from the non-profits (although increasingly less so, it must be said).

What can we conclude about assessment in the humanities from this irresponsibly brief overview of history, the current spasm of reform in European universities, and from the precipitous rise of for-profit institutions in the US? First of all, that we should be aware of the scope and power of the forces we are up against. For some time now, academics have suspected a commercial juggernaut is flattening traditional values, the ideals and principles that have inspired universities since their inception. What was only sensed in an inchoate way in the past has now materialized into an all too

hard-edged reality. Outcomes assessment is a potentially useful tool that—unless we are very canny—may be transformed into the Trojan horse of those outside the academy who wish to turn education into a business, pure and simple. The list of those who wish to do so is long: the British treasury officials who oversee the REF, the European Community bureaucrats who control the Rube Goldberg machinery of the Bologna Process, and the nakedly greedy entrepreneurs of higher education for-profits such as the University of Phoenix in the US. They all have the institution of the university as a source of questioning and self-exploration in their sights. The Great Recession, the global financial collapse in 2008, put a powerful weapon in the hands of those marching under the assessment/impact banner, for it gave their demand for accountability real world urgency.

And that is the great dilemma of the humanities in general and of the literary humanities in particular. The distinction made long ago by the Neo-Kantian historian of thought, Wilhelm Windelband, between the work of the humanities and the sciences is more relevant today than ever. His argument was that the human sciences seek to understand what is distinctive, unrepeatable, new and unpredictable in our individual lives and in human history. At the other end of the spectrum is the emphasis of the exact sciences to elicit from nature general laws, whose validity is greater the more abstract and predictable they are. These extremes—the idiographic humanities and the nomothetic sciences—are not mutually exclusive, of course. But they do point to the difficulty of defining the results of humanistic study, focused as it is precisely on uniqueness, in a way that is easily measurable. The relatively modest goals outlined by units such as the department of comparative literature at the University of Colorado at Boulder probably come as close as we can to finding assessable categories that are meaningful, without falling into a standardized straitjacket.

But in the end, it is only in the scale of a whole lifetime that the worth of literary education may be measured, and that is a scale that cannot be "tuned." When a tape measure or stopwatch or metronome is invented that will succeed in making the study of literature precisely measurable, it will have become another thing. If that happens, our children will look back at what it was and weep for its loss.

NOTES

1 As my ignorance forces me to do, thus ignoring claims from such other parts of the world as India's Nalanda University, or the great linguist Panini's Takshashila (fourth century BCE), now in Pakistan, or the Islamic centers of learning such as Cairo's Al Azhar, the Qarawiyyn Mosque in

Fez, or Mali's University of Timbuktu.

2   Napoleon's victory at Jena was only the effective cause of radical reform in Prussian education. A more likely proximate cause was Kant's 1796 tirade against the medieval organization of the University of Königsberg, about which more is discussed in the essay.

3   By "abroad," I really include only Europe in any significant depth in this paper, denied by my ignorance of events in the rest of the globe from making further comparisons. Even from my parochial perspective, however, it is clear that both China and India are pouring vast treasure into their university systems, but this is a tale very much still in the telling. In the case of China, there seems to be a developing trend that indicates, ironically, that as the West begins to eliminate humanities programs, the Chinese are strengthening them. I cite as evidence Wang Ning's program in Comparative Literature at Tsingtao University (widely known as the "MIT of China"); the return (from his previous post at Duke) of Liu Kang to Shanghai Jiao Tong to become Dean of the Institute of Arts and Humanities; and the self-consciously liberal arts-oriented curricular reforms at the prestigious University of Hong Kong led by Amy Tsui (see Hennock, "University of Hong Kong Looks to West in Curricular Design"). The impulse to strengthen the humanities is a pan-Asian phenomenon: on September 15, 2010, the foundation of a whole new liberal arts college to be jointly administered by the National University of Singapore and Yale University was announced (see Caplan-Briker, "Yale, Singapore plan new liberal arts college").

4   German idealists were unusually inventive in coining derogatory terms for their enemies. Kant's great admirer, Schiller, who spent years as a professor of history at Jena, dismissed his colleagues who concentrated on practical training as "*Brotgelehrte*," or "bread-scholars" (i.e., people who studied merely to prepare for a job to earn their daily bread), in his inaugural lecture, "What Is, And To What End Do We Study, Universal History?" in 1789.

5   *The Conflict of the Faculties* has recently been invoked by a number of others as an aid to understand the present, most notably Pierre Bourdieu, in *Homo Academicus*; Bruce Robbins in "Less Disciplinary than Thou: Criticism and The Conflict of the Faculties"; and Jacques Derrida in "Mochlos; or, The Conflict of the Faculties," and in one of his last lectures, "The University Without Condition."

6   See Nussbaum's *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* and *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, excerpts from which appeared as "Skills for Life: Why Cuts in Humanities Teaching Pose a Threat to Democracy Itself." An even more eloquent argument has been made by the former Dean of the Yale Law School (who also has a PhD in philosophy) Anthony Kronman in *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up On The Meaning of Life*. It is a sign of the times that this book has not had a wider impact.

7   Before becoming Harvard's youngest president, Eliot had been a chemistry professor.

8   The only real defeat he experienced occurred when he tried to abolish intercollegiate sports.

9   Information on the Yale example is taken from Judith Ann Schiff, "When Yale Was a Farming School." One indicator of the continuing struggle between the humanities and the sciences was the attack on literature professors at Yale made by no less than the then-dean of Yale College to the conservative National Association of Scholars in 1991. In his remarks—part of a symposium sponsored by the editors of *Academic Questions*—the then-dean charged that at Yale "the woods are full of humanists who doubt ['the efficacy of reason, or the possibility of truth...']" and that "people in the humanities … disagree about what's good and bad, and overall seem a very funny bunch of guys" ("Doing the Right Thing" 34). Following the largest meeting of the Yale College Faculty ever held (initiated by the author of the present article) on October 3, 1991 at which the Dean's remarks were discussed, changes were made in the administration in the following year.

10 Full disclosure: the author of the present essay served on some of those RAE review panels.

11 The RAE model has been influential in formulation of other European efforts to assess humanities scholarship. Consider the heated resistance of scholars to the European Reference Index for the Humanities (ERIH), the program sponsored by the European Science Foundation (ESF) to give grades to professional journals, ranking them according to whether they fall into category A ("high-ranking international publications"), category B ("standard international publications"), or C (journals "with important local/regional significance in Europe"). The goal of this effort is to be the "first step towards the development of a framework that will enable Humanities excellence to be assessed and verified" (qtd. in Smith).
Sixty journals in history and philosophy of science published in their first 2009 issue a joint editorial condemning ERIH as an initiative "entirely defective in conception and execution" and whose likely effect is that "we will sustain fewer journals, much less diversity, and impoverish our discipline" (Leiter). A particularly thoughtful response to the ERIH initiative is "Failing the Grade: The Craze for Ranking Humanities Journals" (*Kritika* Editors).

12 But many in the British Academy fear things might be even worse under the new coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats headed by David Cameron and Nick Clegg that formed after May 6, 2010.

13 For a full account of these developments, see Thomas, "What Are Universities For?"

14 The situation seems to be somewhat changing in China. See note 3 in present paper.

15 For an overview of earlier German resistance to Bologna, see the interview with Ulrich Teichler, "Das Märchen vom Forscherparadies." It is somewhat unsettling to discover that from at least the early modern peri-

od, German governments were seeking to assess the performance of professors, even to the point of sending spies around the state's institutions of higher learning: "In 1569 the elector of the Palatinate, who was the patron of the University of Heidelberg and sovereign over the land, ordered the university to send a report containing the names of the professors, what topic and at which time each professor lectured, and how many students attended each lecture" (Clark 49). It also interesting that the professoriate resisted: "To this order the university wrote in protest … that such a request was completely unheard of" (49). Earlier, the Emperor sent spies to check up on the universities of the Holy Roman Empire, and professors had to give annual reports (*Professorenzetteln*) to the state on what they had taught that year (cf. Clark 50).

16 See an interview with Professor Reiser, "Universities Are Being Turned into Schools." It is not just disgruntled professors who have raised doubts about Bologna. As the process has unfolded, even some of the original framers of the program are exhibiting serious reservations. Jo Ritzen, president of the University of Maastricht (who helped to lay the foundation for the Bologna Process during his tenure as the Netherlands' minister of education), has recently admitted, "Bologna … has not brought what we hoped for and expected" (qtd. in Labi). This, after more than ten years of the process' existence.

17 Nida-Rümelin is also the editor (with Werner Weidenfeld) of the influential anthology on European identity, *Europaeische Identitaet: Voraussetzungen und Strategien*. For an interview with Nida-Rümelin, see "The Bologna Process Threatens to Founder."

18 "Nida-Rümelin makes the point that, "… it must be said quite plainly that Bologna hasn't facilitated their [students'] mobility but rather considerably restricted it" ("Bologna Process").

19 Local attempts have been made to replicate Bologna in other parts of the globe as well, as witness the "Melbourne Model" introduced by the cost-cutting Vice Chancellor, Glyn Davis, who makes clear that his model, despite its local cognomen, is really a version of the Bologna model. The reforms created a storm of protest from professors and students alike. During the resistance, a leaked document revealed that the university administration had spent over 27 million dollars on *marketing* the model by 2010 ("Melbourne Model").

20 For an authoritative—and horrifying—account what happened during the Bush Administration, see Diane Ravitch's *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education.*

21 See the University of Massachusetts at Amherst Office of Academic Planning & Assessment's document, *Program-Based Review and Assessment: Tools and Techniques for Program Improvement.*

22 Cf. Jaschik, "Assessing Assessment." Full disclosure: the author of the present essay attended the 2008 Teagle Foundation conference in North Carolina where this initiative was first discussed.

23 Adelman argues that the United States should introduce reforms based on

the Bologna Process because it "is an analogue to the macroeconomic theory of convergence" (*Bologna Process* ix). I find this rationale breathtaking. The equation of universities and economics would be troubling at any time, but given the utter failure of economics—especially macroeconomics—to predict or deal with the 2008 global financial meltdown, to cite such a discipline as a model borders on the irresponsible.

24 A move recently urged for US colleges by Stephen Joel Trachtenberg and Gerald Kauver in the *New York Times* op-ed, "A Degree in Three."

25 This point was eloquently made in Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins*, a book that rapidly is assuming the status of a classic.

26 I use the term advisedly, not merely to express an outsider's prejudice. See what the distinguished sociologist and student of management Burkard Sievers (professor at the Schumpeter Institut, Bergische Universität Wuppertal) has to say in his deep analysis of how German universities are now set up, "The Psychotic University."

27 See the text of HB 2504 at <http://www.legis.state.tx.us/tlodocs/81R/billtext/html/HB02504F.htm>.

28 Dickeson is author of a book called *Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services*. The Powell's Books description of this text makes clear what the author means by prioritizing: the book "guides academic leaders through the process of ranking programs according to such critical factors as enrollment size and relevance to institutional mission. The book also includes successful strategies for suspending programs that hover on the margins of productivity and affordability." Cf. <http://www.powells.com/biblio?isbn=9780787948160>.

29 David Mazella, a professor at the University of Houston, contributes an essay to the present anthology that shows admirable circumspection in the very heart of Texas.

30 The University is, like all for-profits, run by a CEO, in this case a man named Stephen Tober who was appointed in June 2009, when his qualifications were listed as: "nearly 20 years of experience in operations and management in a variety of industries including education, information technology services, investment banking and management consulting, most recently holding a senior position with ThinkEquity Partners in Chicago. Tober has also held senior roles in publicly traded companies including SPR, Leapnet and Smith Barney" (American InterContinental University).

31 For profits need such accreditation in order to be eligible for federal financial aid, so that their students will have the possibility of transferring credits to other schools—and so they are eligible for the student loans that are a major source of income for such schools.

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Sublimity, Creativity, and Learning

THE PYGMIES IN THE CAGE: THE FUNCTION OF THE SUBLIME IN LONGINUS

W. ROBERT CONNOR

In memory of Robert F. Goheen

THE EDITORS OF THIS VOLUME have posed powerful questions, ones that go to the heart of the experience of reading and teaching literature. Are those experiences so "sublime" that they are beyond systematic analysis? Are they "*ineffable*?"

The author of the ancient treatise *On the Sublime* took a strong stance on such questions, stronger, perhaps, than has been recognized. In what purports at first to be a handbook on rhetoric, Longinus gradually makes the case that the literary experience of the sublime has profoundly enriching and liberating effects on the individual. Without such experience, the soul shrinks and withers, never attaining its true greatness. The sublime, moreover, is not "ineffable"; it can be recognized and analyzed, and perhaps given expression in new literature, using the techniques illustrated in the treatise.

Thus, below the surface of this ostensibly circumscribed treatise is an implicit educational theory that speaks both to Imperial Rome and to our own age.

Freak Show and Genre

A few pages before the manuscripts of *On the Sublime*, ascribed to one Longinus, break off, there is a haunting image drawn from contemporary Roman society—its circuses, its freak shows, its taste for the exotic and the bizarre, its appetite for entertainment no matter what the cost in human degradation and suffering. The reader suddenly stands before a cage in which are locked small human beings from Africa:

> And so … if what I hear is true … not only do the cages in which they keep the pygmies or dwarfs, as they are called, stunt the growth of the prisoners, but their bodies even shrink in close confinement. (44.5, Fyfe's translation, modified)[1]

The savagery of the practice is even more shocking in the Greek, for the word translated as "close confinement" is literally a "sack for holding the tongues,"

and the "tongues" are the thin reeds that make the overpowering sound that came from the ancient relative of the oboe, the *aulos*. The pygmies, in other words, are confined in a tiny container, where their natural vocal capacity, as well as room to stretch and grow, is denied them. Although later the author refers to this place of captivity as a prison (*desmoterion*), the image he prefers is that of this small pouch (*glossokomeion*) and the voiceless "tongues" within. The enslaved and confined pygmies have, in effect, been reduced to mute instruments of amusement for an entertainment-hungry populace. The image of such confinement leads to a powerful critique of slavery: "on the same principle all slavery, however equitable it may be, might be described as a cage for the human soul, a common prison house" (44.5). This is a "common prison," that is, one in which all are confined, the captives hauled to Rome from remotest Africa, their keepers, and all who are drawn into the spectacle.

To be sure, Longinus does not claim as his own the powerful image of the captives in their confinement; indeed it comes, he says, from an unnamed philosopher whose views he does not find convincing (44.1). The image, however, draws on ideas of enslavement and liberation already developed in the treatise and leads to Longinus' own explanation of the absence of truly sublime talent in his day. But what, one wonders, does this image and the debate within which it occurs have to do with the literary quality of the sublime (*hypsos*) to which the work is devoted? As we look more closely at the literary form of the work, these features become all the more surprising. What, we ask, are the mistreated pygmies doing in a treatise of this sort? To answer this question, we will have to look more closely at the literary form of Longinus' work.

Although the work is filled with astute observations and close readings of literary texts, it cannot usefully be approached as "literary criticism" in the modern sense of that term. Its primary aim is not literary analysis or private delectation, but something "useful" (*chresimon*) for people in civic life (*andrasi politikois*) (1.2). No wonder, then, that Longinus pays special attention to oratory, the literary form of greatest interest to those involved in public life. (Oratory in both Greek and Roman antiquity was regarded as a major literary form, whose techniques helped shape both poetry and other types of prose literature.) No wonder then that the treatise often cites and explicates the canonical orators, not least, *the* orator, Demosthenes. Other passages, including those from Homer—and other poets—are examined for what they can teach the aspiring orator. In chapter 15, for example, he draws on the great poets to illustrate the power that comes from the skillful use of images.

A better approach to the treatise, though still imperfect, is to recognize it as an extension of traditional rhetorical training manuals, the so-called "arts" of rhetoric. ("Art" in this sense is simply a reflection of the translation of Greek *techne* into Latin *ars*. The *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* ["Rhetoric for Alexander"] preserved among the works of Aristotle, is a good example of such *technai* and is still one of the best introductions to ancient rhetoric.)

At the outset of the treatise, Longinus indicates he is writing within the tradition of *technologiai*, that is, treatises about a craft or skill (1.1).[2] The work thus carries on the tradition of rhetorical how-to-do-it treatises that

began in the fifth century before our era, with the shadowy Corax and Tisias, and those that, thanks to the criticisms of Plato, are far better known—teachers of rhetoric such as Protagoras, Hippias, Gorgias, and other "Sophists." (As is well known, the word *sophists* in ancient Greek need not imply deception; it simply denotes a professional teacher of rhetoric, whose services were much in demand in ancient Athens and other democratic cities.[3]) The tradition continued through the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods. It was still flourishing in the tenth century of our era when the earliest and best of the surviving manuscripts of *On the Sublime*, Paris 2036, was copied.

Longinus, it is clear, is well aware of this tradition. He may even have written such a manual himself.[4] The first few pages of *On the Sublime*, moreover, speak in practical, utilitarian terms, and identify the treatise as a *technologia*. Only gradually does it move beyond the limits of such treatises. At the outset, it asks to be approached in part as a "technology of the sublime" (2.1 f), that is, as a practical guide designed to show the aspiring orator or writer how to launch thunderbolts that will stun his audience into earnest submission. This technology is built on the conventional foundation for oratorical achievement, the capacity for powerful speech (8.1). It uses, moreover, the specialized vocabulary and analytical techniques of ancient rhetoric—for example, "amplification" (*auxesis*) in chapters 11 and 12. It may then be viewed as an effort to build on this tradition by developing the idea of "the sublime" already brought into circulation by Longinus' predecessor, Caecilius of Calacte (1.1).

By casting his discussion of the sublime in the mold of a rhetorical treatise, Longinus does two things. First, he establishes the tension or paradox that underlies the whole treatise—the idea that something that appears transcendent can be realized through mundane means. Second, he emphasizes that the importance of the sublime is in the first instance rhetorical; it helps the orator achieve a moment that "scatter[s] everything before it like a bolt of lightning and reveal[s] the full power of the speaker at a single stroke" (2.4). For this purpose, the treatise provides examples both of passages that achieve this effect and of those that attempt it but fall short.

The Sublime as Philosophy

The writing of a rhetorical *techne* was still a fully respectable undertaking in the Roman Empire when, whatever its exact date, this treatise was composed. At the end of the day, anyone who could expand this venerable tradition with a richer vocabulary or new techniques could leave the study feeling pride and accomplishment. But in the middle of the night, doubts or cultural warfare might trouble the sleep. Rhetoric had long been subjected to powerful scrutiny, not least by Plato and his followers. His criticism of rhetoric, perhaps most powerfully articulated in the *Gorgias*, can be generalized to any technology. Since rhetoric, the speaker's technology, can be used for either good or ill, it is not, in Plato's view, an end in itself, but must be subordinated to moral principles.

Teachers and theorists of rhetoric have tried to find a satisfactory resolution to the tension between rhetoric and philosophy, or at a more general level between power and morality, beginning as early as Plato's *Republic* and his contemporary Isocrates, and continuing through Quintilian's reaffirmation of a dictum of Cato the Elder, that the good orator must be a *vir bonus dicendi peritus* (qtd. in Quintilian 12.1), that is, someone both morally good and skilled in speaking.

Where does Longinus stand in this contention between the rhetoricians and the philosophers? If the Platonic criticism had validity against older forms of rhetoric, it would apply *a fortiori* to the even more powerful technology, the art of the sublime, which Longinus was developing. We might expect him then to be defensive, or perhaps to turn his back on this debate as some writers of *technai* did, but not Longinus. Every now and then, philosophy breaks through the technological surface of the treatise. However, it is not the unregenerated philosophical critique of rhetoric propounded by Plato and Socrates, but the significantly modified philosophy of the Roman Empire. By the time this treatise was written, "philosophy" had come to mean in common parlance not logic, metaphysics, or cosmology, but detachment from conventional values of power, wealth, prestige and, not least, from the ravenous appetite for amusement and entertainment. Although the various philosophical schools— Academics, Stoics, Epicureans, Neo-Platonists and so on—often differed with one another, they shared a wariness about the dominant cultural values of their time. "To disdain" or, literally, "to think down" (*to kataphronein*), was an identifying mark of the philosopher, for "philosophy" had become essentially counter-cultural, a steady critique, often associated with bearded ascetics, of what we might call "the Roman way of life."

It is the philosopher's voice that speaks in passages such as this:

> … it is a mark of greatness to look down upon (*kataphronein*) … wealth, status, reputation, unlimited power and everything else that has great external and theatrical appeal; to no sensible man would these appear to be high up on the scale of goodness, since it is no mean good to think one's way around these things. (7.1, my translation)

At the very outset of the work, Longinus has made an even more dramatic move away from conventional rhetoric.

> … the sublime consists in a consummate excellence and distinction of language, and … this alone gave to the greatest poets and prose writers their pre-eminence and clothed them with immortal fame. For what surpasses natural ability leads listeners not to persuasion (*peitho*) but to *ekstasis* (1.3, Fyfe's translation, modified).

But what does he mean by this extraordinary assertion? What does he mean by *ekstasis*?

Ecstasy and Enthusiasm

The art of rhetoric, Longinus implies, puts us in control of things; the sublime, on the other hand, cannot be resisted:

> Everything that startles us and makes us marvel constantly forces us beyond the persuasive and the enjoyable. The persuasive indeed is for the most part within our control, but these things establish a tyrannical hold and irresistible force over every listener. (1.4, my translation)

From *ekstasis*, we derive English "ecstasy," a drug, a kind of euphoria, a hyperbole for pleasure and excitement. For the ancients, the word pointed in quite different directions. While the word has technical uses in medicine and other fields, its etymological sense, "standing away from something," often comes to the fore in discussions of extreme varieties of physical or religious experience. In such cases, it was commonly thought that a person's own breath or spirit (*pneuma*) had gone out from him or her. The next stage might be that some other spirit entered in. This state is now commonly referred to as "possession," that is, a state in which a person feels that he or she has been taken over by a divinity who may use that person's body to speak or act. The entrance of the divinity might also be called by a counterpart term, *enthousiasmos*, from which the English "enthusiasm" is a pale derivative. The Greek term is a combination of *en*, in, and *theos,* god.

The entrance of the divinity might involve spasms, frothing at the mouth, seizures similar to those in epilepsy, known in antiquity as the "sacred disease." Sometimes the possessed person would deliver prophecies, in prose or even in verse. This is perhaps the best way of approaching the prophecies emanating from the prophetess at Delphi, and from the Cumaean Sibyl and other famous and frequently consulted oracles in antiquity. The most familiar modern analogy may be the speaking in tongues by Pentecostals and others.

Ekstasis and *enthousiasmos* in Longinus both allude to this pattern of religious possession. The terms are counterparts. Etymology shows the relationship between the two terms, the one beginning with the word for "out," *ek*, the other with the word for "in," *en*. Longinus uses this vocabulary to talk about an otherwise difficult-to-articulate effect of the sublime. It is still not easy. Longinus gropes for terms, stretches syntax to the extreme, forces one metaphor within another. We can understand some of what Longinus is trying to express because we know that literature can sometimes "take our breath away," but that catches only part of what he has in mind. He recognizes the power of sublime passages to shock and awe an audience, but is no less interested in the possession that accompanies such *ekstasis*. Here, for example, is what Longinus says about one of the techniques he recommends, the direct expression of emotion—it must be genuine emotion—at the proper moment in a speech or text. Some of his comments on the matter are a good illustration of what we have just noted about the complexity of his style. The following translation is as literal as possible in order to catch the metaphors:

> … as if, under the influence of some frenzy (*manias*) and breath (*pneumatos*), to let in the divinity as one lets out one's breath (*ent-housiastikos ekpneon*), and, as it were, to be possessed by Phoebus [Apollo]. (8.4, my translation)

The expression of intense emotion, in other words, brings listeners to a state analogous to possession in a religious cult. They experience something similar to what Pentecostals today might call the Holy Spirit. The metaphors in each case are not about some attenuated "spirituality," but an intense physicality. Participants feel the breath of a divinity. It fills them as they let out their own breath and let in the divine.

The language of religious possession recurs throughout the treatise. In chapter 10.3, for example, Longinus extrapolates from the language of a poem by Sappho that the poetess was inspired as if possessed by Apollo (*phoibatai*).[5] A little later, in discussing Demosthenes' speech, *On the Crown*, Longinus uses a related word as he imagines the orator: "… as it were suddenly inspired by a divinity and, in effect, seized by Apollo (*phoiboleptos*)" (16.2). But again three little syllables, "as it were" (*kathaper*), draw the line between what Longinus sees in Demosthenes and true religious frenzy. Longinus is not suggesting that the effect of sublime literature is to create a moment of religious ecstasy in either speaker or audience. Rather, metaphors drawn from religious possession provide him with a discourse that was not available in the traditional technical vocabulary of rhetorical instruction.

Soul Talk

Vocabulary drawn from ancient religion provides an instrument of great value to Longinus in his discussion of the ability of well-crafted language to astonish and overpower an audience. But religious-like terminology in *On the Sublime* is not limited to this purpose. In the form of "soul talk," it reaches more broadly and more deeply. It allows Longinus to begin an exploration of the effects of sublime language in the deepest parts of our being.

Note, for example, how in discussing the arrangement of words, Longinus extends an analogy between oratory and melody in music. He alludes at first to an instrument widely thought to induce frenzy, the *aulos* (the reed instrument, similar to the oboe, mentioned at the beginning of this essay): "Does not the *aulos* ... induce certain emotions in those who hear it? Does it not seem to carry them away and fill them with divine frenzy?" (39.2). Longinus then uses the example of the *aulos* to suggest that skillfully arranged language in a speech—"which is a kind of melody in words"—can "take hold not of the listener's ears alone but of his very soul" (39.3). The effect reaches far beyond persuasion. It is like a spell cast upon us. But this is white magic, not black, for it turns us towards what is "weighty, deserving of respect, and sublime" (39.3).

Longinus' "soul talk" often seems to embarrass his translators. They squirm to find other translations for the word *psyche* and its relatives—"heart,"

"our thoughts," or simply "us" (8.4, my translation). Longinus, however, has few hesitations about using the term. In fact, the little qualifying words that mark most of his religious terminology as metaphor or analogy are usually absent when he speaks of the soul. For him, the soul is not a metaphor but a reality without which the body is limp and empty (11.2). It may be the locus of the emotions but it is also profoundly affected by them. Indeed an emotion may be defined as a "movement and upheaval of the soul" (20.2). Thus, it can be deeply affected by the sublime:

> For by its very nature our soul is somehow lifted up (*epairetai*) by the truly sublime, and having acquired a certain pride and lofti-ness, is filled with joy and great self confidence (*megalauchia*), as if the soul itself had created what it heard. (7.2, my translation)

This ability of the sublime to lift up the soul can even bring mortals close to the divine, as Longinus indicates in chapter 36.1, "The sublime raises one up close to the lofty mindedness (*megalophrosune*) of God" (my translation).

Here, as so often, Longinus' discussion of the soul turns on a central axis in the work, a polarity at one end of which is greatness or height and at the other meanness and lowness. Since in Greek, words compounded from *mega* can convey height as well as mass, "soul talk" is height talk. These words are part of a metaphorical nexus that ties together images of elevation, verbs of lifting up, and, of course, the sublime itself; hence the translation "lofty mind-edness" just used for *megalophrosyne*. This nexus can easily be obscured by translations that speak blandly of "greatness" or "great writing" when the treatise is concerned with ideas of reaching upward, tallness, loftiness. The sublime (*to hupsos*) is, after all, a word for height, not mass.

Longinus' thinking about the soul becomes clear when the vocabulary and imagery of height are kept in view. In discussing Euripides, for example, Longinus concedes at the outset that the tragic poet was not *megalophues* (5.3)—he lacked a natural inclination toward the grand and lofty—but rather, sug-gests that Euripides successfully forced himself toward such qualities. Longinus then supports this view by citing several passages, including one from the lost play, *The Phaethon*. In this play, Helios allows his son to drive the chariot of the sun—with catastrophic results. Longinus asserts that the soul of Euripides shared the perilous flight of those winged horses. "It could never have imag-ined such things if it had not run neck and neck with those heavenly doings" (15.4). The emphasis on the soul in this passage is doubly interesting. Longinus clearly thinks that it is the soul that makes it possible to imagine the situation. In addition, the image of the soul reaching up to heaven is not a new thought injected at the end of the analysis of Euripides, but is implicit in the "great-ness or loftiness" language of the term *megalophues*, used at the very outset of the discussion.

An Educational Theory

The "soul talk" in the treatise points toward an educational theory. To be

sure, the full scope of the theory is left implicit for the most part, and is largely eclipsed by the concentration on rhetoric. Rhetorical training was a central part of Greek and Roman education for two millennia, from Classical Athens to the fall of the Byzantine Empire.

Indeed in late antiquity and the early Byzantine period, Greek education by and large avoided the relegation common in Western Europe, of rhetoric to one of three preliminary educational roads (the *trivium*, consisting of grammar, rhetoric, and logic). It was rather one of the most prominent of a range of skills (*technai*) widely regarded as important for the society. In 425, for example, when Theodosius established in Constantinople a *pandidakterion*, the first "university" in Europe, there were thirty-one chairs: ten each in Greek and Latin grammar, two in law, one in philosophy, and eight in rhetoric.[6] There were, apparently, no chairs in medicine or theology, nor in what in the West became the *quadrivium*, that is, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and harmony. The *quadrivium* and *trivium*, as their Latin names suggest, were developed in the West, probably in the fifth century of our era, flimsy, one might suspect, against the flood of barbarism, which rose more swiftly and more disastrously in the West than in the East. In the Greek-speaking East, after grammar, rhetoric ruled supreme.

While Greek culture was always deeply concerned with *paideia*, that is, education in all its aspects, very few works dedicated to that subject were composed. The art of rhetoric, by contrast, was the subject of many treatises and discussions. Against this background, a few comments in *On the Sublime* stand out in high relief. While Longinus shares the adulation of rhetoric so widespread among his fellow Greek speakers, he hints at the outset of his work that he intends to address the topic of education more broadly. Longinus criticizes his predecessor, Caecilius of Calacte, for failing to "deal with the means by which we might be empowered to lead our natural capacities toward some significant progress in greatness and loftiness" (*eis posen megethous epidosin*) (1.1, my translation). He drops the topic for the time being, perhaps because he needs first to clarify what he means by "greatness and loftiness," which, as we have seen, is closely linked to the sublime. That clarification emerges in part through his discussion of how Euripides forced (*prosenagkasen*) his nature "into the tragic mould" (15.3). Borrowing a term often used for heroes and others who undergo great labors, Longinus calls Euripides *philoponotatos*, "the greatest lover of toil" (15.3).

But hard work cannot be the whole basis of education. Nor is it simply exposure to, or analysis of, the passages he considers sublime. That is too passive and too easy. Plato, he notes, points in a different direction—to an active process, and a competitive one as well, involving two crucial components—imitation (*mimesis*) and rivalry (*zelosis*): "What is this road and what is it like? It is imitation and rivalry of the great prose writers and poets of the past" (13.2, my translation). *Mimesis* is frequently used in ancient discussions of literature to describe the relationship between writer and subject matter or writer and a tradition on which he or she draws. It is clear that for the Greeks, such imitation was not an attempt at exact replication, but adaptation—creative restatement. But what of *zelosis*, the word from which English derives both "zeal"

and (in all probability) "jealousy"? The translation "rivalry" catches only part of the meaning since the Greek term reflects the motivation behind *mimesis*—driving ambition, competition, and sometimes envy as well.

The importance of *zelosis* in Longinus' thought is evident in a difficult, but crucial passage, another analogy drawn from Greek religion. After relating the familiar story that the prophetess of Apollo at Delphi was inspired by breathing vapors coming from a cleft in the bedrock, Longinus draws an analogy to the inspiration (in the literal sense of breathing in) that comes from great writers:

> Thus, from the grand and lofty nature of those of long ago a
> kind of outpouring is brought into the souls of those who aspire
> to rival them (*zelounton*), as if from the mouths of the sacred.
> (13.2, my translation)

What does it mean to be a "rival" of one of the great writers of the past? Longinus means—as do many ancient authors who use these terms—surpassing the classics, outdoing models of acknowledged eloquence and wisdom. Longinus' purpose, we see once again, is not to write "literary criticism" but to help others—his contemporaries, his students perhaps—to write and speak at the highest possible level. In today's world, he might feel more comfortable in a creative writing or perhaps even communications program, rather than in English, comparative literature, or classics. He would not, if I read him correctly, be satisfied if a student wrote a fine critical essay; he would want to hear words that thunder louder than Demosthenes, or to read a passage even grander than Homer.

So the student, in this view of education, cannot be a passive admirer of past greatness; he or she must *compete* with it and try to surpass it. This becomes clear in one of the most powerful—or sublime—passages in the work: the analogy it draws between human life and the great Greek national festivals (*panegyreis*) of which the Olympic games are the best known example. It is part of our very nature, Longinus asserts, to stride forward into competition, just as contestants do in festival games:

> For nature (*physis*) has not decided that human beings are lowly or
> ignoble creatures, but has led us into life and into the whole uni-
> verse as if we were going to be spectators (*theatai*) of all of it in
> some great festival—or rather contestants (*agonistai*) eager for
> honor. Nature has lost no time in inspiring (*enephusen*) our souls
> with an irresistible passion (*erota*) for whatever is great and, by
> comparison to ourselves, more divine. (35.2, my translation)

In this passage, in fine rhetorical fashion, Longinus corrects himself, saying we are not onlookers but contenders, competitors in the games, seeking to be honored. That impulse is built into us. It is part of our souls. Implicitly it makes us admirers and rivals of the achievements of other contenders, past and present.

Longinus is not alone in drawing his imagery, and perhaps his theory, from athletics. Theon of Alexandria in the first century of our era developed rhetorical instruction based on *progymnasmata*—exercises requiring the pupil to produce speeches of various types on subjects drawn from history and mythology. Later Aphthonios of Antioch developed a textbook with exercises in fourteen different categories such as encomium, fable, maxim, confirmation, refutation, *ekphrasis*, and invective.[7] The athletic imagery in Longinus parallels that of *progymnasmata* and evokes further questions. What happens, after all, to the contestant in such a setting? The body is stretched and strengthened; it grows stronger, taller, more muscular, and more vigorous. By analogy, we might expect, the soul when it imitates, and then surpasses its models, should be ever more vigorous and reach ever higher. Ultimately, this kind of athlete becomes a person of true loftiness of spirit (*megalopsychos*).

One can readily imagine the treatise concluding not long after the image of the competitor striding into one of the great pan-Hellenic festivals. One part at least of a powerful, ambitious, educational theory is now before us. The student must not get away with recognizing, analyzing, praising great writing. Even *mimesis*, creative adaptation, by itself is not sufficient. One must surpass the past.

To stop at this point, however, would be to avoid difficult questions. What prevents such *zelosis*? Why is it so rare? The answer to that question requires us to look at the other end of the axis around which the treatise turns—the downward tendency toward corruption and the wasting away of the soul.

The Pygmies

In its final pages, having moved from the modest genre of rhetorical handbooks to a powerful and evocative image of the pan-Hellenic festival, the treatise metamorphoses again, this time into a dialogue or debate. An interlocutor steps in, an unnamed philosophical friend of the author. Although such antilogies are a well-attested feature of ancient debates, they are not the way rhetorical handbooks went about presenting their material. They belong, in other words, to a different genre. And in *On the Sublime*, as the genre changes, so does the thrust of the argument. Longinus now confronts a problem in the theory behind the first part of the treatise. How are we to explain the absence of truly sublime literature in the present age?

> We find natures that are supremely persuasive … and especially rich in literary charm, yet really sublime (*hupselai*) and transcendent (*hypermegetheis*) natures are no longer, or only very rarely, now produced. (44.1)

The observation restates the question raised by our analysis of Longinus' educational theory: what keeps us from *zelosis*? Both Longinus and his philosophical interlocutor, who now enters the discussion, agree on the point that the age in which they live is deficient in the truly sublime. Both use metaphors of

enslavement. But they have very different views on how the sorry state of contemporary culture is to be explained. The interlocutor adduces his explanation with some diffidence. He knows, surely, that since the Roman Empire does not allow true democratic freedom, his theory will seem out of date and irrelevant, but he propounds nonetheless "the hackneyed view that democracy is the kindly nurse of genius" (44.2). He suggests that only political freedom has the ability to nurture the thoughts of great intellects. But now "we seem to be schooled in an equitable slavery" (44.3) and do not even taste the true source of great oratory—freedom. It is here that the interlocutor introduces the image to which the title of this essay alludes:

> "And so," my friend added, "if what I hear is true that not only do the cages in which they keep the pygmies or dwarfs, as they are called, stunt the growth of their prisoners, but their bodies even shrink in close confinement, on the same principle all slavery, however equitable it may be, might well be deemed as a cage for the human soul, a common prison." (44.5)

The anonymous philosopher's conclusion is clear—all slavery imprisons our souls. No wonder then, since all are entrapped in the benign autocracy of the Roman Empire, that no truly sublime literature results.

The image of the stunted pygmies is perfect for the thematics of the treatise. We have glimpsed grandeur and loftiness of soul, now we see its opposite. Yet the image is presented through the voice of the interlocutor, not of the author himself. The author distances himself from this socio-political explanation in favor of a highly moralistic one. He is willing to accept the idea that in this world everyone is enslaved, and even that such enslavement prevents sublime literary expression. But he reverses the interlocutor's critique of the loss of freedom under the *Pax Romana*, pointing instead to a perpetual but inward warfare:

> But consider. Perhaps it is not the world's peace that corrupts great natures but much rather this endless warfare which besets our desires (*epithumias*), yes, and the passions that garrison our lives in these days, and make utter havoc of them. It is the love of money, that insatiable sickness from which we all now suffer, and the love of pleasure that enslave us, or rather, one might say, sink our lives, "with crew and all" into the depths (*katabuthizousin*). (44.6)

The image of the sinking ship replaces that of the caged pygmies, and drives home Longinus' own critique. His well-heeled, well-educated readers—not some captives from a far off land—are the true slaves and the ones who are pressed downward. And we are ourselves (for Longinus uses the first person, not the third) the cause of our misery since we have chosen a life of pleasure and greed. Not content to rely on the image of the shipwreck, Longinus launches a whole fleet of new metaphors. Greed is a sickness, and not just any

sickness but one that makes its victims shrink and wither (*nosema mikropoion*); we waste away, malnourished, because of it. Greed inverts the proper relation of man and god. No longer does a divinity come inside us and inspire us; rather we go out and make gods (*ektheiasantas*) of the evil that descend from wealth. These evils, among them personified Extravagance, march into our cities and our homes, once Wealth has opened the gates for them. They nest there, like noxious birds, and breed their nestlings, Swagger (*alazoneia*), and Delusion (*tuphos*) and Luxury (*truphe*). These in turn, if they reach maturity, breed Hybris, Transgression (*paranomia*), and Shamelessness (*anaischyntia*), the inexorable masters of our enslaved souls (44.7).

And what is the end of this? Greatness of soul withers and starves to death *(phthinein de kai katamarainesthai ta psychika megethe)* (44.8). Under such circumstances the soul can not reach to the sublime nor can greatness flourish.

Is, then, the experience of the sublime and of its results, greatness of soul and sublime writing, impossible in an age enslaved by wealth and pleasure? Longinus holds out little hope: "This must inevitably … happen …" (44.8); "... the whole life of each one of us is now governed wholly by bribery … we have sold our souls for profit …" (44.9). Amid all this—if we still possess any grandeur of soul—it loses its zeal (*azela ginesthai*) (44.8). And although the castigation becomes slightly less universal, applying to "all but a few of us" in 44.11, there is no hint that studying great literature, or experiencing the sublime, will free us from our slavery to wealth and pleasure. Indeed the relationship between freedom and education seems just the opposite: we must first free ourselves from addiction to wealth and pleasure for *then*, and only then, is there some chance that *mimesis* and *zelosis* will do their work and we might achieve, even in the present dismal age, some grandeur and loftiness of soul.

Is even that too optimistic? Are we, ancient Romans and contemporary Americans alike, hopelessly enslaved by "the emotions (*ta pathe*) that garrison our lives?" (44.6). Longinus' answer depends on his understanding of the emotions, and perhaps, of the effect that the experience of the sublime has on the audience, even in adverse cultural circumstances. When the sublime induces *ekstasis*, for example, are we temporarily freed from emotions that might otherwise drag us to lower levels of experience, expression and action? Can the Socratic cross-examination, the Platonic dialectic liberate us from base emotions if used consistently and forcefully enough early in an education? My suspicion is that the treatise went on to discuss the emotions along the lines suggested, but after promising a discussion of the emotions, the manuscripts end in mid-sentence.

Longinus on Trial

Much remains to be resolved when the manuscripts of *On the Sublime* break off, but clearly its author has answered at least some of the questions the editors of this collection have put to him. In his view, even the most sublime passages of literature are capable of identification, explication, and evaluation. Longinus not only implies, he *demonstrates*, that there is nothing "ineffable" about the sublime.

But when viewed as an educational theory, his treatise is polemical, deeply counter-cultural and likely to provoke anger, then and now. It is easy to imagine his critics linking arms to demand Longinus' condemnation. One might imagine the proceedings to be of the following sort:

> **Prosecutor:** Your honor, I charge the defendant, Longinus, author of the scurrilous tract *On the Sublime*, with fraud, and the corruption of the young. He has misrepresented his work as a handbook of rhetorical instruction when it is in fact an attack on our culture and its most deeply held values. It turns out to be a manifesto that will mislead all who read it, not least our young people.
>
> **Judge:** How plead you, Longinus?
>
> **Longinus:** Proudly guilty as charged, your honor. I contrived a treatise that looked like a rhetorical handbook and transformed it into something much more interesting and important. If this is fraud or misrepresentation, I am guilty. If its effect is to displace an education based on self-gratification, and avarice, then I will happily pay the penalty.
>
> **Judge**: And, Mr. Prosecutor, what penalty do you seek?
>
> **Prosecutor**: Exile, your honor. Exclusion from the company of all who teach and all who learn.
>
> **Judge:** The court will need to determine whether there was intent to deceive.
>
> **Longinus:** Objection, your honor. Deception has not been established.
>
> **Prosecutor:** Longinus has himself admitted that he "transformed" his treatise into something quite different. It turns into a diatribe against the existing social order. Only malice aforethought can account for such a vicious attack on our society.
>
> **Longinus:** I transformed the literary form of my writing because my purpose is transformation—the transformation of those who read my work.
>
> **Prosecutor:** Transformation? I submit, your honor, that the only transformation he had in view was the transformation of his bank balance. But, as your honor has no doubt noticed, the defendant has admitted his deception, and its intended effects on his readers. I therefore, ask for a directed verdict of guilty.
>
> **Judge:** Lest anyone accuse us of being prejudiced or peremptory, the court will overlook the defendant's admission and enter a plea of "not guilty" on his behalf. The prosecution may present its case.
>
> **Prosecutor:** The case is quite simple, your honor, but not as simple as the defendant's claims in this absurd pamphlet. In order to sell copies of it, the defendant has made repeated fraudulent claims about the study of literature. He contends that the purpose of such study is to encounter the sublime or the ineffable, when everyone knows the purpose of literature is entertainment.

Longinus: I admit that I believe that literature has a higher purpose than entertainment. I also admit that in my writings I have used words to speak about words. I notice, however, that the prosecution also uses words to show what may or may not properly be said about literature. Clearly then literature is not ineffable, nor incapable of being analyzed.

Prosecutor: Objection your honor. Double negatives should be banned from the courtroom as unnecessarily confusing.

Longinus: A mere litotes, your honor.

Judge: Objection sustained. The defendant will avoid rhetorical figures and confine himself to language simple enough to be understood by the prosecution.

Longinus: Then let me state that I have never said the sublime was "ineffable." In fact, I think such language deserves no place in the study of literature. In fact, since the term applies properly only to God and his works, your honor, may I bring a charge of blasphemy against the prosecutor?

Judge: The court does not recognize such an accusation. Return to the case at hand.

Prosecutor: I will allow the matter of the sublime and the ineffable to pass. No one cares in any event about such pedantic distinctions. The point is not whether sublime passages can be identified, explicated and analyzed using the flimsy and implausible techniques promulgated in this pamphlet. That is not the issue.

Judge: Perhaps the prosecution will explain to us, then, what *is* the issue. But may I remind you, counselor, that the prosecution must show that someone has been or will be harmed by the defendant's conduct.

Prosecutor: Of course, your honor. The defendant's conduct has the effect of wasting time and energy on the study of literature. Follow Longinus' course and you—that is our society, not you personally your honor—will end up displacing a truly practical education, one based on the three F's: facts, figures and formulae.

Judge: If I follow you correctly, counselor, all studies that are not based on these three F's should be prohibited—not just Longinus' approach to rhetoric but philosophy, history, music, and the other arts. Would that include the study of law?

Prosecutor: With all due respect, your honor, I had hoped that it would be clear that my claim is much narrower. I only claim that Longinus' approach to literature and to education puts the student on a slippery slope. A few innocent sounding observations about Homer, Demosthenes or some other deservedly obscure author lead to dilettantism, and the waste of time and resources. These are drawn away from other more practical instruction and from the profit motive that has made our society great and prosperous. Those who follow Longinus will end up unemployed, alienated, and impoverished, with

heads in the clouds and purses empty.

Longinus: Bravo! Well spoken! You show a fine capacity for lofty oratory, Mr. Prosecutor. I am honored to be accused by you.

Judge: Silence. I warn you, Mr. Longinus, against further interruptions. Do you wish to call any witnesses, counselor?

Prosecutor: None is needed, your honor. I myself provide the necessary proof of the fraudulence of the treatise. In it the accused contends that by contemplating and analyzing certain passages one can experience the sublime and thereby become a more effective orator or writer. Yet in my reading of widely appreciated and highly successful authors of the present day I have never encountered passages that could conceivably be called "sublime," nor has such reading ever provided me with any practical benefit apart from entertainment. Many distinguished literary critics have written to confirm my judgment. On this basis, the prosecution rests its case.

Judge: Your argument cuts to the heart of the matter, counselor. I am impressed by how little you have learned from the study of literature.

Prosecutor: Many others have studied more intensely and gained even less than I have.

Judge: I congratulate you for your modesty, counselor. But let us see now what response the defendant will make, unless, of course, he is dumbfounded by the sublimity of the prosecution's argument.

Longinus: On the contrary, I am always inspired by true eloquence. You see, I believe, that sublime literature can bring our souls very close to the grandeur of God.

Prosecutor: "Souls!" Your honor, you have heard it from his own mouth—the defendant has violated yet another legal principle—the constitutional separation of soul talk and literature. By asking one further question I will show how seriously this aggravates the defendant's misconduct.

Judge: Proceed.

Prosecutor: Do you have a valid license to use the word "soul"? I point out to the court that all such licenses expired two hundred years ago and have not been renewed.

Longinus: Guilty again. I have no such license, nor would I ever apply for one. But in turn I ask you, distinguished prosecutor, one question: can you show that two hundred years without "soul talk" have enriched the understanding of literature, or our lives?

Prosecutor: It has freed us from all sorts of error, notably religious dogma and what you call inspiration and enthusiasm.

Longinus: And in doing so it has, I submit, depleted the understanding of why literature should be studied. This impoverishment of language has debased the education of our young people. It locks both teacher and student into low and narrow linguistic cages. Such confinement stunts intellectual and personal growth. It is criminal to

defraud people by calling such impoverishment "education."

Judge: I must remind the defendant that it is he who is on trial here, not the prosecutor. You may respond to the defendant's comments if you choose, counselor, but you are under no obligation to do so.

Prosecutor: Thank you, your honor. I will simply ask one further question, one that brings us to the core of the matter, and to our reason for bringing this case in the first place. You said, Mr. Longinus, that sublime literature can bring us close to the grandeur of God. Do you believe that one can *measure* how close one has thereby come to this "God" of yours?

Longinus: By no means, but …

Prosecutor: Aha! You admit then that all this "soul talk" is vague and immeasurable. Head in the clouds again, eh, Mr. Longinus?

Longinus: I have no way to measure closeness to the divinity, but I believe we know some of the steps that can bring a person closer to such experience and can determine whether those steps are being taken or not.

Prosecutor: I presume that such steps include reading sublime literature and talking about what makes it sublime. A waste of time, to be sure, but even worse, tell me this, how could one possibly *know* whether these steps lead anywhere?

Longinus: Here is one way. You might ask how often there are sublime passages in your own work, or that of students who have studied with you. This will not let you measure your distance from the grandeur of God, but you will in that way have some indication of whether the experience of the sublime is bearing fruit.

Prosecutor: We are talking about the study of literature, not creative writing.

Longinus: If those two are to be detached from one another, you might prefer I told you another way?

Prosecutor: Another way?

Longinus: Yes, the really important one. The reason we value the sublime is that it nurtures a loftiness and grandeur of soul—what we call *megalopsychia*. When the study of literature no longer had the soul in view, this term went out of circulation. But I am sure that you, learned counselor, understand what is meant by it.

Prosecutor: Of course I do. It comprises generosity, courage, boldness and …

Longinus: And?

Prosecutor: And much, much more.

Longinus: Look around you, then. Is generosity and courage and boldness and "much, much more" what you see? Are these the qualities you find among your colleagues? When you sit in the company of the most learned or the richest or the most powerful do you find *megalopsychia*, or pettiness, meanness, narrow mindedness, pedantry, greed? Which is it? The sublime, you see, nurtures grandeur of spirit and lifts

us up; it helps us free ourselves from enslavement to delusionary pleasures and desires. You might say that sublime literature, properly studied, is an instrument for a truly *liberating* education. That is the kind of transformation I had in view in writing the treatise.

Prosecutor: Your Honor, the defendant has several times admitted his guilt. We do not need to listen to his sermonizing. He has clearly violated the protocols of literary study and perpetrated a theory of education that will do great harm to young and old alike. I ask for a directed verdict of guilty as charged.

Epilogue

The judge found this a difficult case. After re-reading *On the Sublime* he concluded that Longinus had made grand and unverifiable claims. On that basis he found him guilty of fraud. He was also troubled by the author's evident hostility to the imperial regime and to the values of an affluent and pleasure-seeking society. But he doubted that Longinus' critique would truly corrupt the young. In lieu of exile he sentenced him to many years of community service as night watchman in the local library. Even now late at night one can sometimes hear exclamations of delight, when in the intervals between his solitary rounds he finds yet another example of the sublime.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, I use the translation of W. Hamilton Fyfe in the Loeb Classical Library.
2. Cf. 12.1.
3. The evidence about such treatises was gathered by Ludwig Radermacher, *Artium Scriptores* (9-10).
4. The surviving portion of an *ars rhetorica* ascribed to a Longinus is now accessible in Patillon and Brisson, fr. 48.
5. This reading is based on a conjecture, an inspired one, by Rothstein, for the bland and inappropriate manuscript reading, "she was frightened."
6. The "Byzantine University" entry in Wikipedia provides a useful discussion.
7. See the "Aelius Theon" entry in Wikipedia and the "Aphthonios of Antioch" entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* for more information.

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BIOGRAPHY

W. Robert Connor was President of the Teagle Foundation from 2003 – 2009, during which time he reaffirmed the Foundation's long-standing commitment to higher education, and refocused it on improving student learning in the liberal arts and sciences. He taught for many years at Princeton University, where he was the Andrew Fleming West Professor of Classics. He was for thirteen years the President and Director of the National Humanities Center. He is the author of *Thucydides* (Princeton UP, 1984), a study of the ancient historical writer, as well as several books on Athenian political and cultural history, and many essays on liberal education and the undergraduate student experience.

APPROACHING THE INEFFABLE: FLOW, SUBLIMITY, AND STUDENT LEARNING

DONNA HEILAND

"I GET IT!" "THAT'S IT!" "I FIGURED IT OUT!" Anyone who has ever focused unwaveringly on solving a problem, anyone who has all at once understood the real stakes of an issue or an argument, anyone who has suddenly answered a seemingly unanswerable question will understand the excitement of those magical moments when—apparently out of nowhere—the right answer presents itself. And anyone who has ever taken a class, or taught one, will know that those moments do not—in fact—come out of nowhere, that they are nonetheless elusive in their workings and difficult (at best) to engineer. And so the question arises: do such moments have any place in our thinking about the goals of education? Is it legitimate to build into a class or program or entire curriculum an expectation that students will pursue intellectual inquiry with a passion that leads them to insight?

Not everyone thinks so. Take, for example, Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys,* which is about a group of teachers preparing a class for the Oxford / Cambridge entrance exams. At stake is what they teach and how, with the inspirational but decidedly unorthodox methods of Hector being played off against those of the sexy, young Irwin and the not sexy, not young, but ever solid Mrs. Lintott. The play prevents us from easily championing Hector's mode of teaching by also making him something of a sexual predator, but as far as debates about educational goals, methods and outcomes go, the headmaster—less than inspirational though he may be—sums it all up well when he says:

> Shall I tell you what is wrong with Hector as a teacher?
> It isn't that he doesn't produce results. He does. But they are unpredictable and unquantifiable and in the current educational climate that is no use. He may well be doing his job, but there is no method that I know of that enables me to assess the job that he is doing.
> There is inspiration, certainly, but how do I quantify that? (67)[1]

The word "inspiration" here is resonant, meaning—in its Latin roots—to "breathe … into"; to "infuse some thought or feeling into," especially "by

divine or supernatural agency" (one thinks of poets being inspired by their muses); to "arouse, awaken" or even "kindle" " in the mind or heart" ("Inspire," def. I.1, II.4, 4a, 5b). The notion of inspirational teaching as "kindling" students' intellects calls to mind language often used by W. Robert Connor, who—when he was president of the Teagle Foundation—liked to characterize a good college experience as one that helped students "catch fire." While one might smile at a phrase that conjures Monty Python-like scenarios of students aflame, it is also clear what he meant by it. He was talking about the same kind of inspirational experience that Hector aimed to conjure for the history boys, the same kind of intense engagement leading to insight that is the subject of this essay. And in an argument that complements Connor's essay in this collection—even as it counters Bennett's headmaster—I want to argue that the inspirational and the assessable are not so much opposed as complementary: the inspirational need not be as unpredictable as the headmaster implies, even as the assessable need not be as reductive.

In making this argument, I am countering not only Bennett's headmaster as he dismisses a pedagogy he views as unassessable, but also those on the other side of this debate, who fear assessment methodologies that can not capture the fullness, the subtlety, the "ineffability" of genuine learning experiences. Here I am encouraged by the work of Elaine Showalter, whose book *Teaching Literature* formulates both a specific overall learning goal for the field of literary study ("to train our students to think, read, analyze, and write like literary scholars, to approach literary problems as trained specialists in the field do, to learn a literary methodology ...") and a set of common "competencies and skills" that "we want students to learn" (25-26).[2] One could agree or disagree with her formulation, but the very fact of its existence makes clear that literature classes and classrooms are built around quite specific goals (they just might not be shared). Creating "catch fire" experiences for her students is not one of Showalter's, but if we hold on to the idea—if we assume that experiences of intense engagement leading to insight can be at the heart of a classroom learning experience—we can still ask: are they truly as elusive as all that? Do we really have no way at all to talk about them, understand them, maybe even shape them to some extent?

I contend that we do, and in what follows, I make this case in an argument that develops through several stages. Beginning with the concept of "flow" in psychology, I build on the work of L. Dee Fink to argue that flow experiences can help shape particularly intense forms of student engagement in learning, and move on to consider such engagement as not only affective but also as cognitive and even creative experience. Proceeding to the second stage of my argument, I contend that aspects of flow experiences are analogous to—perhaps even synonymous with—the experience of the sublime, which has been powerful within the field of literary study, and again consider the affective, cognitive and creative dimensions of that experience. Finally, I turn to the question of whether sublime experiences can be not only intentionally shaped in a classroom setting but also assessed. Drawing on existing research that points to the possibility of accomplishing this seemingly impossi-

ble task, I consider what it would take to develop such an assessment mechanism—one that would gauge the extent to which students engage so intensely in their work as to achieve not only affective but also cognitive results—and raise the possibility that disciplinary experts and assessment experts could work together on such a project.[3] This kind of assessment could tell us a great deal about when and why students experience the remarkably intense form of engagement and learning that is the focus of this essay, and so make it a more regular and replicable part of their education.

In experimenting with this approach to understanding student learning, I aim first of all to advance the discussion of teaching and learning in the literature classroom. Further, I hope to move discussions of disciplinary assessment in a direction somewhat different from—and I hope complementary to—those that we have and are developing. Good disciplinary assessment is certainly taking place at institutions across the country, and one can learn a great deal from current scholarship and reporting on this subject.[4] What seems still underdeveloped in the literature and practice of assessment are efforts to bring the language and tools of a specific discipline to bear on the assessment of student learning in that discipline. In experimenting with such an approach, my intention is to explore the extent to which a disciplinary vocabulary can energize and help with the work of assessment, and perhaps also bridge the gap between scholars / scholarship in a field such as literary study and in the fields of institutional and educational research.

"Flow" and Student Learning

I begin outside the discipline of literary study, with the work of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, whose notion of flow—as L. Dee Fink has argued before me—speaks implicitly to the work of classroom teaching (Fink 152-54). Csikszentmihalyi developed the concept of flow from his study of "people who seemed to be doing things that they enjoyed but were not rewarded for with money or fame." He worked with "[c]hess players, rock climbers, dancers, and composers [who] devoted many hours a week to their avocations," and asked:

> Why were they doing it? It was clear from talking to them that what kept them motivated was the quality of experience they felt when they were involved with the activity. …[I]t often involved painful, risky, difficult activities that stretched the person's capacity and involved an element of novelty and discovery. This optimal experience is what I have called *flow*, because many of the respondents described the feeling when things were going well as an almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness. (110)

Further, he writes, "[t]he flow experience was described in almost identical terms regardless of the activity that produced it. Athletes, artists, religious mystics, scientists and ordinary working people described their most rewarding

experiences with very similar words. And the description did not vary much by culture, gender, or age …" (110). The nine repeatedly identified qualities of the flow experience are:

- "There are clear goals every step of the way."
- "There is immediate feedback to one's actions."
- "There is a balance between challenges and skills."
- "Action and awareness are merged."
- "Distractions are excluded from consciousness."
- "There is no worry of failure."
- "Self-consciousness disappears."
- "The sense of time becomes distorted."
- "The activity becomes autotelic." (111-13)

This list begins with what one might describe as the structure of the experience: "clear goals," "immediate feedback," and "a balance between skills and challenges," all of which are reasonably easy to create and control. As one moves down the list, though, the characteristics of flow become ever less easy to structure: "action and awareness are merged," "distractions" disappear, along with "the worry of failure." That merging of "action and awareness" signals a blurring of boundaries that becomes more intense in subsequent items, and by the time one reaches the point of self-consciousness disappearing, the flow experience seems to describe the subject's relationship to what s/he is doing in a way that signals not just engagement, but an absorption by one's tasks that might even be described as a form of self-transcendence (or self-loss). Describing what it means for self-consciousness to disappear, Csikszentmihalyi writes: "[A]fter an episode of flow is over … [w]e might even feel that we have stepped out of the boundaries of the ego and have become part, at least temporarily, of a larger entity. The musician feels at one with the harmony of the cosmos, the athlete moves at one with the team, the reader of a novel lives for a few hours in a different reality" (112-13). The distorting of time goes hand in hand with this dissolution of self, and the sense of the activity itself as autotelic or "an end in itself" reinforces this understanding of the flow experience as something that takes one out of oneself.

To this point, flow experiences would seem to be the province of individuals. Fink has noted that such experiences can perhaps be created in the classroom, arguing that "if teachers design their instruction properly, they can create the conditions in which flow activities are likely to occur" (154). In so doing, he picks up on an important aspect of Csikszentmihalyi's thinking, which positions flow as an aspect of creativity, and sees creativity not in "traditional" terms, as something that characterizes individuals, but as a process that takes place within a system.[5] That system involves not only the individual, but also an established "domain" (a specific knowledge base "nested" in a larger "culture") and "field" (his term for the "gatekeepers" that allow the knowledge base to change) (Csikszentmihalyi 27-28). The classroom "system" certainly modifies the one Csikszentmihalyi describes, for a student's insight will not

necessarily constitute an original and enduring contribution to a domain, but it is still valuable to consider that moment of insight in the context of the classroom "system" in which the established domain is shaped and advanced by the teacher and ideally by peers as well (the "gatekeepers"). This is the creative work of teaching and learning in a collaborative environment.

Is it realistic to think colleges and universities could foster such a paradigm for teaching and learning, and even if they did, would it really be effective? Here it is helpful to relate the notion of flow—understood as a process of intense engagement in a task or activity that, I would argue, ultimately leads to insight—with recent research on student learning that also links engagement with attainment. George Kuh and his colleagues at the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) have argued—in their study *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter*—that

> student engagement has two key components that contribute to student success. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success. The second is the ways [*sic*] the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services to induce students to participate in and benefit from such activities. (9)

Like the creativity that is nurtured by the flow experience, student engagement hinges on the work of an individual in a system (the classroom as well as the college or university as a whole), and can open up multiple paths to success in college. Kuh et al. offer a number of recommendations for creating especially strong forms of student engagement in learning, including one that reads like a recipe for creating flow experiences. The injunction to "Make Talent Development a Central Tenet in the Institution's Operating Philosophy" advises educators to "[s]et performance standards for students at high but attainable levels consistent with their academic preparation," "[p]rovide generous amounts of helpful, constructive feedback," "[b]alance academic challenge with adequate support," and "[u]se pedagogical approaches that complement students' learning styles" (300-02). And there is no doubt of the effectiveness of engaged learning methods: "engagement increases the odds that any student—educational and social background notwithstanding—will attain his or her educational and personal objectives, acquire the skills and competencies demanded by the challenges of the twenty-first century, and enjoy the intellectual and monetary gains associated with the completion of the baccalaureate degree" (Kuh, *High-Impact* 22).

If it is fair to correlate experiences of flow with student engagement as understood by Kuh and his colleagues (and I would argue that it is, though flow is perhaps a more intense form of engagement than most), then fostering flow experiences can indeed lead to student success. Still, the question remains: what exactly do students gain? Flow experiences are anchored in a

series of recognizable intellectual or cognitive moves (articulating goals, offering feedback, defining an appropriate level of intellectual reach) and conclude—at least some of the time—with intellectual or cognitive gain. Importantly, Csikszentmihalyi elaborates on the "autotelic" nature of flow with reference to science, saying:

> Scientists often describe the autotelic aspects of their work as the exhilaration that comes from the pursuit of truth and of beauty. What they seem to describe, however, is the joy of discovery, of solving a problem, of being able to express an observed relationship in a simple and elegant form. So what is rewarding is not a mysterious and ineffable external goal but the activity of science itself. It is the *pursuit* that counts, not the attainment. (122)

Translating this insight to the literature classroom, one can argue that the essence of flow comes in the intensity of the learning process itself, the intensity of the engagement with the text and the questions it raises. At its heart is the intellectual "pursuit" of learning: "discovery," "solving a problem," and "express[ing] an observed relationship in a simple and elegant form." Flow thus seems to encompass and drive the rational, the analytical, and to point to the *generation* of such outcomes as being at the heart of the kinds of learning described here. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that the engagement created by flow experiences is—at its most developed—not just a means by which one moves towards learning, but a learning outcome in itself (a subject to which I'll return later).[6]

Even as flow and the engagement it describes can be seen as enmeshed in the work of cognition, they are also are clearly affective as well, and I want to argue that affective experiences can also have a place in a classroom. I am hardly the first person to have made this claim. Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues' still influential *Taxonomy of Educational Goals* addressed not only the cognitive domain but the affective as well, noting the close connection between the two.[7] More recently, L. Dee Fink has argued for a revision of Bloom's cognitive outcomes in particular, observing that "individuals and organizations involved in higher education are expressing a need for important kinds of learning that do not emerge easily from the Bloom taxonomy, for example: learning how to learn, leadership and interpersonal skills, ethics, communications skills, character, tolerance, and the ability to adapt to change" (29). Further, and importantly, Fink states:

> My interpretation of the aforementioned statements is that they are expressing a need for *new kinds* of learning, kinds that go well beyond the cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy and even beyond cognitive learning itself. This suggests that the time may have arrived when we need a new and broader taxonomy of significant learning. (29-30)

The development of that "taxonomy of significant learning" is the subject of his book of that name, and it has six major categories: "foundational knowledge," "application," "integration," "human dimension," "caring" and "learning how to learn."[8] At a first reading, one wants to zero in on those learning experiences that seem particularly focused on outcomes that are other than cognitive as those that most obviously revise Bloom's list: caring, for example, and the learning experiences that engage the "human dimension," which Fink describes as "address[ing] the important relationships and interactions we all have with ourselves and others" (44). Fink himself does not distinguish cognitive and other kinds of outcomes so easily, though, guiding us to see this taxonomy as "not hierarchical but rather relational and even interactive," so that "achieving any one kind of learning simultaneously enhances the possibility of achieving the other kinds of learning as well" (32).

Fink's understanding of cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes as connected taps into the same long history of research on the relationship of cognition to affect that Bloom invoked, and leads one to see—as others have argued—that the distinction between the cognitive and non-cognitive realms is perhaps not even sustainable. As early as the nineteenth century, William James argued that physical experience can cue a specific emotion without the involvement of consciousness, or in other words, that "we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble" (qtd. in Dawes 455).[9] Literary critic James Dawes notes that "contemporary neural science" validates this view when it demonstrates that "emotions can overwhelm cognition" (455, 457), and Antonio Damasio—who makes scientific research on this subject available to an audience of non-scientists—pushes even farther when he argues that "the reasoning system evolved as an extension of the automatic emotional system, with emotion playing diverse roles in the reasoning process" (xi-xii).[10]

That feeling and thinking are connected seems at this point indisputable, and what this line of thought urges us to consider is the possibility that emotion—feeling that is grounded in bodily experiences such as crying and striking (to return to the examples of my last paragraph)—is not only intertwined with cognition, but is actually a form of cognition, a way of coming to knowledge. Recent work on what the field of cognitive psychology labels "grounded cognition" helps to make this case. In a valuable overview of this work, Lawrence W. Barsalou draws together a range of research that challenges the notion that cognition is distinct from "perception," "action" and "introspection" (617) and states: "'Grounded cognition' reflects the assumption that cognition is typically grounded in multiple ways, including simulations [of perceptual, motor, and introspective states],[11] situated action, and, on occasion, *bodily states*" (619, italics mine). What this perhaps means for classroom teaching is that students' "gut feelings" and affective responses to texts can be understood as valuable in themselves and as pushing into the realm of cognition.

And here I want to turn from psychology and neuroscience back to the discipline of literary study and ask whether we can not get an even better understanding of this aspect of classroom teaching by working with a tool that

literary critics use often: theories of the sublime. Sublime experiences are intense affective experiences whose connection to the work of the intellect has been an ongoing subject of discussion. And sublime experience is a valuable lens through which to understand those key moments in a literature classroom in part because literature itself so often seeks—more or less explicitly—to generate them.

Creativity and the Sublime

Sublime experiences are helpful in thinking about the teaching of literature because they engage exactly that moment—a moment that can arise in reading, in teaching, and in learning—when one's relationship to one's subject is all consuming. Whether one is overwhelmed by a novel, or whether one suddenly sees all its moving parts fall into a kind of order, that interaction is all that matters.[12] Characterized by a blurring of boundaries between an individual and the world around her that echoes key aspects of the flow experience described by Csikszentmihalyi, they might also be described as being at the heart of what Csikszentmihalyi called a "traditional" understanding of creativity. "The creative process has traditionally been described as taking five steps," he writes. "The first is a period of preparation, becoming immersed, consciously or not, in a set of problematic issues that are interesting and arouse curiosity"; "[t]he second … is a period of incubation, during which ideas churn around below the threshold of consciousness"; "[t]he third … is insight, sometimes called the 'Aha!' moment"; "[t]he fourth component is evaluation, when the person must decide whether the insight is valuable and worth pursuing," and "[t]he fifth and last component of the process is elaboration. It is probably the one that takes up the most time and involves the hardest work" (79-80).

This is a vision of creativity that focuses not on systems but on individuals—a vision that Csikszentmihalyi does not discount, but complicates, in part by insisting that we see this individual creativity in a systemic context—and efforts to account for the "aha!" moment at its heart have, not surprisingly, been many. A line of increasingly scientific research offers explanations from fields ranging from psychoanalysis to cognitive neuroscience; insofar as theories of the sublime can also be helpful here, the humanities also have a role to play in understanding the heart of these moments of insight.[13]

Theories of the sublime attempt to understand exactly what happens in moments of intense engagement between a subject and an object. They cannot capture such a moment precisely, but they can approach it—define the conditions under which it occurs, the connections between people and things that shape and are shaped by it, what the experience looks like before and after. In their ability to shadow but not fully capture those moments, theories of the sublime are like asymptotic curves, always approaching but never actually meeting the lines toward which they seem inevitably headed. Still, they have the potential to be powerful levers for pedagogy and that possibility is what I'd like to explore, drawing on Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* and Immanuel Kant's "Analytic

of the Sublime," in his *Critique of Judgement*—still two of the most important treatises on the sublime—to do so.

As theorized by Edmund Burke, sublime experiences erase subject-object boundaries (Heiland 33).[14] Burke writes:

> The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature,* when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. (57)

Sublime experience for Burke is one in which the mind is overwhelmed by an external force, and his description of the process suggests considerable passivity—indeed, "paralysis of our rational faculty" (Ryan 271)—on the part of the person having the experience.[15] Still on the same subject, Burke later cites Milton's "portrait of Satan" from *Paradise Lost* (I, 589-99) as a source of sublime experience, writing that "[t]he mind is hurried out of itself, by a croud [*sic*] of great and confused images; which affect because they are crouded [*sic*] and confused" (62). This example is particularly interesting from a pedagogical perspective, suggesting that sublime experiences can be sparked by the act of reading, but describing them in such a way—as initiated by confusion and characterized above all by chasing away rationality—that one has to wonder whether such an outcome is in any way desirable in a classroom. Sublimity in this form would seem to consist of a turn away from active reasoning to passive feeling that would seem very far from what most of us would consider a desirable form of student engagement and entirely divorced from learning.

At the same time, though, Burke's description of sublime moments—those moments of total absorption by something outside oneself—are very close to the heart of what Csikszentmihalyi describes as the experience of flow. And as Burke probes the "efficient cause" of sublime experiences, he approaches the ground so recently mapped by neuroscience, arguing that the mind-body relationship is at the heart of those experiences: "Our minds and bodies are so closely and intimately connected," he writes, "that one is incapable of pain or pleasure without the other" (129, 133), and he spends considerable time trying to discover "what affections of the mind produce certain emotions of the body," as well as "what distinct feelings and qualities of body shall produce certain determinate passions in the mind" (129). Vanessa Ryan comments that Burke's "physiologism … has invited criticism and ridicule not only in his own time but also in our own" (269-70), and a twenty-first-century reader will almost certainly smile at his description of how "mimicking the looks and gestures, of angry, or placid, or frighted [*sic*], or daring men" has led him to experience the very "passion whose appearance [he] endeavoured to imitate"

(Burke 133).[16] Then again, in that description, does Burke not anticipate Barsalou's understanding of "grounded cognition" by over two centuries? Here one might want to say, with a nod to Jonah Lehrer, that Burke was a neuroscientist, or at least a cognitive psychologist, and anyone in a literature classroom—teachers and students alike—will benefit from the historical perspective that Burke brings to discussions of those moments of intense engagement and insight that are his subject and mine.[17]

Where Burke understands sublime experience as an intense affective experience through which one is entirely absorbed by something external to oneself, Kant significantly revises this formulation when he identifies sublime experience as a function of the human mind above all. "The sublime in Kant is the resistance against that which had been previously considered sublime," writes Ryan (278). Rather than being overwhelmed by that which is outside itself, the mind asserts its superiority, and in that assertion lies the sublime experience. Kant explains it like this: "*Sublime* is the name given to what is *absolutely great*" (94.§25). However, that which is "absolutely great" is "not to be looked for in the things of nature" (whose parts are all relative to each other), "but only in our own ideas" (97.§25). In other words, sublime experience takes place when we understand that we will never see absolute greatness in the world around us, but we nonetheless conceive of such a thing in our minds. And in still other words, sublime experience takes place "at the point where pure reason transcends the sensuous" (Ryan 278). At that point, the mind not only realizes its own capacity, but understands itself as independent of that which would overwhelm it and so "saves humanity in our own person from humiliation" (Kant 111.§28). Sublimity for Kant, then, is not about self-loss but about self-assertion and is intimately tied to the exercise of our mental capacities. Where Burke's analysis of the sublime can perhaps help us understand something about how affective experience can contribute to student learning—by framing, for example, what happens when a student loses herself in a text or a painting in a kind of sympathetic identification with it—Kant shows us how the individual regains mental control over that kind of intense experience, and is thus valuable in understanding how an experience of intense engagement with an object of study might be linked back to the development of one's cognitive capacities. His moment of mastery corresponds very roughly, perhaps, with the fourth and fifth components of those "traditional" theories of creativity described above, when the individual evaluates and elaborates on the insight of the "aha!" moment.

My argument has moved from a description of "catch fire" moments in student learning, through analysis of the psychological concept of flow to provide a framework for understanding the process inaugurated by those moments, and finally to a discussion of what I see as the culmination of the flow experience: that complete absorption by something beyond oneself that is described in the literature of the sublime. Sublime moments, as I read them, are without doubt a part of the flow experience—part of what makes creative, cognitive insight possible—and perhaps also the insight itself (or the nearest we can get to a representation of it). Even as light is both wave and particle, sublimity is both experience and insight.

In developing this line of thought, I have been trying to come to terms with what is often seen as most elusive about the learning experience: what engages students in the first place and what happens when their engagement leads to those seemingly sudden moments of insight, those moments when they magically seem to "get it." Fink has argued that one can structure classes so that students are likely—though not guaranteed—to experience flow in the classroom: getting to know one's students well enough to set goals for them, ensuring that those goals are ambitious enough to "stretch" students but not so ambitious that they'll be frustrating, providing "*teaching and learning* activities that will offer learners the right level of challenge along with proper support" (all of these steps relate to what Csikszentmihalyi describes as finding "a balance between challenges and skills" [111]), and providing prompt feedback on their work (Fink 152-54). That process can create the utterly focused experiences that Csikszentmihalyi describes, the loss of self that seems to mimic the sublime experiences that Burke and Kant describe, and I would further suggest that, if one can increase the likelihood of a flow experience, then one can also increase the likelihood of a sublime insight or "aha!" moment. And one can—and must—develop ways of assessing whether those experiences have been achieved and what students have learned as a result.

Can We Assess Sublime Learning?[18]

Existing assessment methodologies perhaps begin to give us ways to understand when and why students experience the kind of learning I have described here. Charles Blaich points out that the "Need for Cognition" Scale (see fig. 1)—which measures "the tendency for an individual to engage in and enjoy thinking" (Cacioppo and Petty 116)—offers a possible first step. A "tendency" is a "disposition" rather than an outcome, but even a "disposition" to the kinds of thinking specified by this particular scale suggests a pleasure in immersing oneself in intellectual activity that is reminiscent of flow experiences and the sublime learning that I've been arguing is at their heart. And if this is the case, then what are we to make of the fact that—according to data collected through the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education—there is a group of students whose "need for cognition" actually grows over the first year of college (Blaich)? And that this growth can actually be predicted by students' scores on a group of twelve questions—NSSE's "deep learning" scale[19]—which ask about how frequently or to what extent students have:

1. Analyzed the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory, such as examining a particular case or situation in depth and considering its components;
2. Synthesized and organized ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships;
3. Made judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods, such as examining how others gathered and interpreted data and assessing the soundness of their conclusions;

4. Applied theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations;
5. Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources;
6. Included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs, etc.) in class discussions or writing assignments;
7. Put together ideas or concepts from different courses when completing assignments or during class discussions?
8. Discussed ideas from [their] readings or classes with faculty members outside of class;
9. Discussed ideas from [their] readings or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, co-workers, etc.);
10. Examined the strengths and weaknesses of [their] own views on a topic or issue;
11. Tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective;
12. Learned something that changed the way [they] understand an issue or concept.[20]

In other words, the twelve educational experiences identified in this group of questions make it more likely that students will experience a greater "need for cognition," and—again—if we can even speculatively link the "need for cognition" with the intensely engaged flow experiences that I have been discussing

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1. I would prefer complex to simple problems.
2. I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking.
3. Thinking is not my idea of fun.*
4. I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities.*
5. I try to anticipate and avoid situations where there is likely a chance I will have to think in depth about something.*
6. I find satisfaction in deliberating hard and for long hours.
7. I only think as hard as I have to.*
8. I prefer to think about small, daily projects to long-term ones.*
9. I like tasks that require little thought once I've learned them.*
10. The idea of relying on thought to make my way to the top appeals to me.
11. I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems.
12. Learning new ways to think doesn't excite me very much.*
13. I prefer my life to be filled with puzzles that I must solve.
14. The notion of thinking abstractly is appealing to me.
15. I would prefer a task that is intellectual, difficult, and important to one that is somewhat important but does not require much thought.
16. I feel relief rather than satisfaction after completing a task that required a lot of mental effort.*
17. It's enough for me that something gets the job done; I don't care how or why it works.*
18. I usually end up deliberating about issues even when they do not affect me personally.

*Reverse scoring is used on this item.

Fig. 1. 18-Item Need for Cognition Scale, Cacioppo et al. "The Efficient Assessment of Need for Cognition" (307). Reprinted with permission of the authors.

(and at this stage this line of thought is no more than speculation or suggestion, an invitation to research), then we are on the road to assessing the frequency and effectiveness of sublime learning in a classroom.

Blaich's data map one possible path to assessing whether we are creating the conditions for flow experiences and sublime learning. His research has a complement in that of Thomas Nelson Laird and his colleagues, who have shown that those same NSSE questions cited above correlate positively with students "critical thinking dispositions" (Nelson Laird et al., "Predictive Validity"; Nelson Laird, "Unpacking") which Nelson Laird describes as "much like need for cognition" (E-mail to author). Both Blaich and Nelson Laird, then, are pointing to practices—those identified by NSSE's deep learning scale—that help make flow experiences and sublime learning possible, and still more direct measures of those outcomes can be imagined. One might ask, for example: "Have you ever been so totally absorbed in a book / poem / class discussion that you lost track of time?" Given that such experience can lead to cognitive insight (solving a problem, seeing a truth) that in turn should lead to a sorting, sifting and development of ideas of a recognizably academic sort, we could also inquire about the follow-up: "Did that experience give you insight into the central ideas of the book / poem / discussion" and "Were you were able to develop that insight in a class discussion / paper / exam"? In this way, we would begin to develop a way of measuring the seemingly unmeasurable, of furthering our understanding of that which has seemed to define an outer limit of what can be articulated and understood about learning.[21]

And so I conclude with a question: can we go still further down this road? If the answer is yes, then I would also ask whether those who would argue for this intensely engaged form of learning as a crucial part of undergraduate education could combine forces with those whose expertise would help us assess its effectiveness. Could disciplinary experts collaborate with assessment experts to develop a way of gauging whether students are experiencing flow and gaining the insight that can come with it?[22] Such learning is not just a means to an end but also an end in itself, a learning experience and learning outcome rolled into one, and while I do not know of a single instrument that measures both engagement and cognition—the linked characteristics of flow experiences and of sublime experience that have been the focus of my argument—that is just what is needed here.[23] Such an instrument could surely help us as we work to create sublime learning experiences and to assess exactly what is gained through them. That gain would certainly include the lessons of the task at hand (that is, the exercise around which the flow experience is structured), as well as the methods and subject matter of the discipline(s) in which the work is situated, to some degree at least, and may even reach more widely. Csikszentmihalyi links experiences of flow to happiness, and an education that can foster happiness—a happiness tied to learning—can sound clichéd but is surely a good thing. Such an education speaks to the whole person, and to a central goal of liberal education today. To the extent that the teaching of literature can contribute to those—even help to shape them—both the discipline and the larger project of liberal education benefit.

NOTES

1   These remarks on *The History Boys* are drawn from a presentation I initially made to the Council of Independent Colleges in 2007, and have repeated in other talks, for the American Philological Association, in 2008, and the American Council of Learned Societies, in 2009.

2   Thanks to Steven Mintz, Director of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences' Teaching Center at Columbia University, for making me aware of Showalter's work on this subject.

3   Thanks to Charles Blaich, Director of Inquiries at the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College and Executive Director of the Higher Education Data Sharing consortium (HEDS), for directing me to the concept of "flow" and for invaluable help in thinking through some of the issues I engage in this essay.

4   See especially Banta's *Assessing Student Learning in the Disciplines* (a volume that reprints articles from Banta's *Assessment Update*) and the program, departmental and disciplinary efforts catalogued by the National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

5   Cole's essay in this volume also discusses this point.

6   Thanks to Charles Blaich for helping me understand this point.

7   Bloom and his colleagues' taxonomy of cognitive skills (published in 1956) still resonates today, mapping out development from simple to complex ways of knowing: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Their discussion of affective goals, which appeared eight years later, is focused on the development of an internalized system of values via a five-step process that begins with "receiving" of "stimuli," moves through "responding" to them, "valuing" them, "organizing the values into a system" and finally "reach[ing] a point where the individual responds very consistently to value-laden situations with an interrelated set of values, a structure, a view of the world" (Krathwohl et al. 34-35). The second taxonomy has clearly not sparked the same interest as the first, perhaps for the very reasons that the authors identify when they discuss the "[e]rosion of [a]ffective [v]alues" in the articulated goals of a number of courses he and his colleagues studied: difficulty in measuring such outcomes, the time it seems to take to reach them, the "privacy" of one's personal values, and the fear that an education focused on affective outcomes would amount to "indoctrination" (Krathwohl et al. 16-18). That said, Bloom and his colleagues' identification of these two taxonomies is valuable, as is their acknowledgement of the fact that "cognition and affect can never be completely separated," and "the possibilities that one is in large part the effect of the other" (Krathwohl et al. 85).

8   Fink introduces his taxonomy on pages 30-31 and works with it throughout the book.

9   Krathwohl et al. discuss James' argument for the connection of the affective and cognitive domains as well (46-47).

10   For more on the line of thought that extends from James through Damasio, see Jonah Lehrer's discussion in *Proust* 15-22.

11 In this context, simulation is "the reenactment of perceptual, motor, and introspective states acquired during experience with the world, body, and mind" (Barsalou 618).

12 Connor's essay in this volume offers a complementary perspective on the sublime.

13 Csikszentmihalyi discusses major lines of research in this area, pointing to (a) psychoanalytic explanations that see "the curiosity at the roots of the creative process—especially in the arts" as "triggered by a childhood experience of sexual origin, a memory so devastating that it had to be repressed" and "the creative person" as "one who succeeds in displacing the quest for the forbidden knowledge into a permissible curiosity," using the "incubation" period to tap into subconscious concerns that are at the heart of the creative endeavor (101); and (b) research based in cognitive theory, which also "assume[s] … that some kind of information processing keeps going on in the mind even when we are not aware of it," but views connections between ideas as forming "more or less randomly," with those that are "robust surviv[ing] long enough to emerge eventually into consciousness" (101). He himself offers a third possibility, speculating that the distinction between "serial and parallel processing of information" may provide an analogy for how the brain seeks to solve problems, breaking them up into component parts so that it can work on them separately and in non-linear fashion (110-11).

   More recently, research in cognitive neuroscience has taken strides to understanding exactly how "aha!" moments work. Summarizing this work, Jonah Lehrer argues that the "insight process … is a delicate mental balancing act" that begins with focused "attention on a single problem" but then demands a time of "relaxation" (as researcher Mark Jung-Beeman, qtd. in Lehrer, put it), of "letting the mind wander," which creates the neurological conditions for insight to occur ("Eureka Moment" 43). That time of wandering is interestingly accommodated within the flow experience. Csikszentmihalyi quotes Freeman Dyson identifying the moment of relaxation, "shaving or taking a walk" as part of what allows the "merging of action and awareness" in the flow experience (119). Such moments open the mind to "unconventional ideas" and to the sudden "burst of brain activity" that, we now know, inevitably accompanies the "aha" moment ("Eureka Moment" 43), and are—I would argue, extrapolating from what Csikszentmihalyi writes—quite different from the sorts of distractions (thinking about "health or tax problems," for example) that disrupt the process of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 112).

14 In my discussion of Burke and Kant, I work with some of the ideas and that I developed in *Gothic and Gender: An Introduction*, making some of the same points and moving beyond/revising them on occasion.

15 Vanessa Ryan reads Burke much as I do, arguing that "Burke minimizes the role of the mind in the experience of the sublime and that he characterizes the sublime as a natural force that is by its very definition beyond man's ability to control" (267). She argues that a history of "[r]eading Burke from

a Kantian perspective has led critics to deemphasize the physiological basis of Burke's theory and has given rise to the view that he associates the sublime with an act of mastery and a sense of self-exaltation" (270).

16 As Ryan also notes, Thomas Weiskel comments on this aspect of Burke's writing on the sublime (270).

17 Lehrer's *Proust Was a Neuroscientist* makes a persuasive case for the ways that literature anticipates the development of neuroscience, and his opening chapter on Walt Whitman specifically takes up the question of mind to body, and of feeling to thinking.

18 "Sublime learning" is a phrase—and an idea—with a history, both of which I have pondered for some time. Laura J. Rosenthal and I used "sublime learning" in our 2007 "Request for Proposals" to this volume, and W. Robert Connor engages the idea in the Teagle Foundation's *Liblog* entry entitled "Magical Rationalism" (Sept. 9, 2009).

19 Nelson Laird, Shoup and Kuh discuss the development of the NSSE deep learning scale and place the scale in the context of other research on "deep learning." In contrast to "surface-level processing," in which students "focus on the substance of information and emphasize rote learning and memorization techniques," "deep-level processing" is "focus[ed] not only on substance but also the underlying meaning of the information." Deep learning is active and engaged, "represented by a personal commitment to understand the material which is reflected in using various strategies such as reading widely, combining a variety of resources, discussion [of] ideas with others, reflecting on how individual pieces of information relate to larger constructs or patterns, and applying knowledge in real world situations." Finally, "deep learning" involves "integrating and synthesizing information in ways that become part of one's thinking and approaching new phenomena and efforts to see things from different perspectives" (3-4).

20 See Nelson Laird, Shoup and Kuh for this table (24). Note that the table includes three additional items which were dropped, due to space constraints, in 2005.

21 In this volume, Walvoord's essay also arrives at a formulation of questions along these lines—numbers 8 and 9 of her list of proposed learning goals for undergraduate literature majors, and Sarah Goodwin's essay speaks directly to the question of sublime learning and its assessability. Charles Altieri's essay resonates with these and with mine in interesting ways.

22 Rachelle Brooks' study of liberal education outcomes in the disciplines of classics and political science (discussed in this volume) begins to model this kind of collaboration, though the outcomes on which that study focuses are critical thinking and post-formal reasoning.

23 While no one instrument assesses both engagement and cognition, Nelson Laird has commented that "[d]eep approaches to learning, as a construct, likely sits between common measures of engagement (time on task, frequency of contact with faculty, etc.) and the 'intense engagement'" that is my focus (personal communication).

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BIOGRAPHY

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FEARFUL SYMMETRIES: RUBRICS AND ASSESSMENT
SARAH WEBSTER GOODWIN

Measurement

<div align="center">[a]</div>

If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character, the
Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all
things & stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull
round over again.

<div align="center">[b]II</div>

Reason or the ratio of all we have already known is not the same
that it shall be when we know more.

<div align="right">William Blake, There Is No Natural Religion (1-2)[1]</div>

IN THIS CRYPTIC WORK, BLAKE famously and obliquely makes a case
for the "Poetic or Prophetic character," which he understands as a mental
capacity that can be at work in any kind of thought or expression. Our minds,
he argues, are capable of learning that is not bounded by what we perceive in
the material world or by what is already known and taught. Learning can
grow beyond what is known, and when it does, it has a poetic and prophetic
character: a shaping force and an intimation of things to come.

Philosophy and experimental science, he implies, may stop at repeating the
logic of what is known; it is the power of science to be predictably reproducible.
But he also implies that not only in poetry but also in philosophy and all of the
known sciences, a certain kind of learning may happen that breaks the bound-
aries of what is known—that, we would say now, changes paradigms, or intro-
duces a depth or complexity to matters once thought self-evidently clear. This is
where the romantic notion of the scientist as discoverer reclaims science as a
sublime undertaking: thus Keats, in "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer,"
compares reading Homer to an astronomer discovering a new star, or to "stout
Cortez" charting a new continent.[2]

That kind of learning may seem to have little to do with undergraduate
education and learning outcomes assessment. It could be argued that yes, our

philosophers and poets and scientists are directing their work toward break-throughs: new solutions to old problems, new forms of expression, new mole-cules and technologies; but our undergraduates learn the foundations of the disciplines, basic knowledge, principles, syntagms, conceptual and integrative tools and models. We don't expect breakthroughs or new paradigms from undergraduate students, so they are not typically in our learning goals and our assessment rubrics. In the influential "Essential Learning Outcomes" devel-oped by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) under the auspices of its "Liberal Education and America's Promise" (LEAP) initiative, "Critical and creative thinking" is listed among several other "Intellectual and Practical Skills"; the culminating outcome is "Integrative and Applied Learning, including synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies" (AAC&U 3). We sense that this "advanced accomplishment" does not encompass Blake's "Poetic or Prophetic character."

Can we imagine Blake's response to this sense of what we want our stu-dents to learn in college? Would he draw a line at the sixteenth year of institu-tional education and say, "Now let the real learning begin"? Or might we take a cue from Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience,* and consider what possible role our sense of the "Poetic and Prophetic character" might play in the edu-cation of college students? As many colleges undertake to establish goals for our students' learning, devise rubrics based on those goals, and conduct time-consuming and sometimes expensive assessments to determine how well our students are meeting those goals, we might legitimately ask whether we are applying our own disciplines' most complex hermeneutics to this work. We could answer that the learning goal of "creative thinking" that appears on the LEAP list of goals and in the rubrics based on them is one way of saying that we do ask our undergraduate students to create new knowledge, interpretive models, exegeses, and creative works: we apprentice them in, among other things, work of a prophetic or poetic character. Their attempts may be as Calculus 1 is to higher mathematics—assuming here that higher mathematics includes sublime learning—but we aim to get them as far along as we can.[3] Should we be able to articulate where this learning happens, what it looks like, and when it happens at the most advanced level—even when, paradoxically, the project is to express something unknown, ineffable, unrecognizable, or mute?

The project of assessment has its roots in an Enlightenment conception of education as profoundly rational: assessment is a form of knowledge-gather-ing, of *Wissenschaft* or research; the object of study is our students' learning. Its research methods presume that this knowledge exists and can be discovered, broken down, analyzed, and evaluated piece by piece. We practice this research in a post-Enlightenment context that does not allow for easy positivism. There is no discipline today in which the status of evidence is not at least somewhat contested, the epistemologies at least somewhat unstable. It may be facile to assert that the romantic challenge to Enlightenment positivism is still in force in our radical questioning of what we can know and discover. But alongside that fundamental doubt, so evident in Blake's assertions above, another romantic notion persists that might also seem to thwart the project of estab-

lishing goals, rubrics, and assessments for student learning: that is the notion that our highest learning is sublime, somehow ineffable, even terrifying, intuited as the poetic or prophetic character and best described in metaphor rather than abstraction. Many faculty members would likely dismiss such a notion as fuzzy, irrational—or romantic. And yet we also recognize that the metadiscourses in our disciplines, our foundational theories, nearly always lead to irresolvable contradictions or unknowable conditions. Very often, the work we admire most addresses or realigns the assumptions under which we pursue our learning and, ostensibly, our teaching. Some of us might even argue that our ambition for our best students is that they come to understand how fault-ridden the foundations of our inquiry are. Thus it seems that our goals for their *creative* thinking are closely aligned with *critical* thinking: with understanding the ways our knowledge is contingent, fragmentary, and anything but disinterested.

It seems, then, that we may have the rubrics for assessing "the Poetic or Prophetic character" of our students' work, in the measures of creative and critical thinking. And yet there seems to be still too great a disjunction between what Blake intends and what rubrics can address. Rubrics, and assessments based upon them, surely have more in common with the "charter'd streets" (1) and "mind-forg'd manacles" (8) of Blake's "London" than they do with prolific energies.[4] Is it in any way possible to view the rubric's grid not as a constraint but instead as a means of liberation?

In this essay, as I develop an answer to that question, I will focus on the rubric as a tool for evaluation and assessment, based on my own experience in the classroom. I will argue that rubrics are useful; most importantly, they are deservedly seen as democratic, in that they make our assumptions and aims transparent and accessible to all students. But rubrics have their limitations: they may lead us to a false sense of safety, may make us miss openings onto new ideas and processes. Rubrics, like our goals for students' learning and our assessments, must be conceived in an ongoing dialogue (explicit or implicit), and are themselves subject to evaluation. For them to work over a long-term process as part of teaching and learning, they must be expressed in terms that encourage both students and faculty to take risks, to go beyond the "same dull round"; if we can find the right language, they can also lead both students and faculty to be more ambitious, to reach the point of sublime wonder and awe. But still, I will argue, if the texts are well chosen and the assignment well designed, the best things that come out of the class will exceed the rubric.

Finally, I will argue that we can extend these lessons from the classroom to the role of rubrics in program-level assessments. And that both can be Blakeian and liberating in their energies.

Rubrics

Rubrics have come to play a crucial role in the assessment of student learning. Well-designed rubrics, we know, emerge out of the criteria that we actually look for in our students' best work. They clarify for both faculty and students just what it is we are looking for in their learning and achievements,

and they lay the groundwork for assessing student learning in the aggregate. Although the rubric as an instrument for grading a specific assignment is distinct from rubrics that are used for broad and aggregated assessments, both work on the same principle: the goals for the students' learning and achievement can be articulated as separate features and can be separately evaluated and measured. In grading, the rubric clarifies for faculty and student both the goals for the assignment and the criteria for grading. In program-level assessment, the rubric similarly is based upon the learning goals for the given unit of assessment (for example, a course or group of courses in a given discipline), and it both clarifies those goals and separates them into assessable units. A rubric for an individual assignment can be based upon the larger goals for a course or even for a major, and it can simultaneously inform the student, help faculty to evaluate the individual work, and lead to aggregated evaluations in a program-level assessment. As recent a work as Stevens' and Levi's 2005 book, *Introduction to Rubrics*, focuses almost exclusively on the rubric in the classroom, though it points out the usefulness of rubrics for broader assessments. For rubrics to translate to the programmatic level, faculty must collaborate on creating them. The recent work on rubrics edited by Terrell Rhodes and published by AAC&U opens by asking whether this undertaking is even possible:

> Is there a shared set of expectations for learning that individual faculty can use in the classroom, that can be aggregated for programmatic evaluation and sampled for institutional reporting?… Can the shared expectations for learning be articulated so that students can use them to understand and make judgments about their own learning strengths and weaknesses?… Can we assess student learning in ways that actually provide faculty and students with information helpful to improve pedagogy and the development of learning over time as well as provide programs and institutions with summative information for reporting? (1)

The answer, implicitly, is yes, and this publication goes further than any other I know of to make the rubrics correspond genuinely to the most complex kinds of learning that faculty from multiple disciplines might be willing to agree on. In other words, rubrics here go well beyond the context of classroom use, and to get there, the faculty's "shared expectations" become the standard. Despite this major difference, the assessment rubric shares with the teaching rubric a fundamental structure: it spells out expectations for students' learning in multiple categories that then serve as the basis for evaluation.

Because my concern here is to scrutinize closely how a rubric works, and whether it works as a constraint or a liberating framework, I begin here with the rubric's narrowest scope: the individual assignment. I remember clearly the first time I saw a rubric for grading papers; it was in a pedagogy workshop well over a decade ago at the college where I teach, and a respected faculty member distributed the rubric he used (see fig. 1). He explained that he gave the rubric to the students along with the paper assignment, so that they knew

what he was looking for; and he filled it out as he graded their papers, so that they could see the strengths and weaknesses very clearly.

1. Responds fully to assignment	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
2. Expresses its hypothesis, question, or problem clearly	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
3. Begins and ends effectively	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
4. The content is based on accurate information	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
5. Provides adequate supporting arguments, evidence, examples, and details	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
6. Is well organized and unified	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
7. Analyzes the data well	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
8. Uses appropriate, direct language for the defined audience	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
9. Uses adequate sources	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
10. Correctly acknowledges and documents sources	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
11. Is free of errors in grammar, punctuation, word choice, spelling, and format	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
12. Shows originality and creativity in realizing 1-9	Excellent	Very Good	Average	Fair	Poor
OVERALL EVALUATION					

Fig. 1. Rubric for grading papers, author and date unknown.

I was impressed by the rubric. It clarified things that had seemed murky, and I could see that it could help my grading be fair and consistent. Still, something about it made me uneasy: it must have been the boxes. They were too linear; they seemed to imply that each of these categories was clearly distinct from the others, and each could be assessed in an objective, almost scientific way. So when I made use of it the first time, I took away the boxes, leaving words on the page and perhaps believing there was a certain ambiguity in the white spaces. I found the rubric made my grading easier and quicker. I could attend principally to the categories on the sheet of paper, and my students could see just what they needed to revise. I spent less time writing comments, and achieved much the same thing, I thought, with check marks.

But very quickly, it seemed there was something missing. I tried to find words for it, and it wasn't easy. It was somewhere in the terrain of number 12: "Shows originality and creativity in realizing 1-9," and I found that I valued

that category disproportionately. For example, some papers that seemed really good did not necessarily express a clear thesis or hypothesis in the conventional way at the opening of the paper—and somehow got away with it. It seemed that an idea could be developed well with some awkward transitions; that sometimes a certain quality took over—something to do with the voice and the logic propelling the paper—that seemed even more important than the handling of transitions, for example, or the clarity of the conclusion. So I added a point to the rubric: "13. *Je ne sais quoi*." I didn't actually give it that much thought at the time; I just wanted the flexibility to be able to acknowledge a strong paper that broke some of the conventions.

Not too long after that, I took on an administrative role and stopped teaching for a time; the rubric went into a file in the back of the drawer, so it didn't evolve. But that number 13—somehow aptly numbered— stayed with me. Why was it particularly satisfying that it was in another language that many of my students didn't understand? That it alluded to *not* knowing rather than to knowledge? Or was this really just intellectual laziness, an unwillingness to think through and articulate what happens when a student paper has a quality that seems to elude the standard qualities, almost to rewrite the rules, in a way that seems surprisingly authoritative or authentic?

With this question in mind, I've looked at rubrics over the past several years in hopes of finding one that does articulate this quality. Arguably, that number 12 on the first one does: we may well be talking about "originality and creativity." Those are terms out of the romantic lexicon, kin with "Poetic and Prophetic character." Interestingly, most rubrics in my unscientific survey do not contain them. (This survey was so unscientific it consisted of slipping rubrics into a manila folder, sources unmarked, as I came across them over a period of some eight years, little thinking I would ever be writing about them and wishing I knew their sources.) They emphasize, to cite another one in my file: "Thesis, organization, transitions, development, evidence, conclusion, diction & style, mechanics": all crucial aspects of good writing and clear thinking. Another rubric discussed in a workshop at my college a number of years ago—again, I no longer know the source—approaches the matter somewhat differently by providing language to describe whether the given paper achieves "High," "Middle" or "Low" levels of success in four areas: Focus, Organization, Style, and Mechanics. Then it concludes with a series of questions about the degree to which the author has met these standards (see fig. 2). The questions make a difference in the tone and function of the rubric. Where a grid had suggested something quasi-scientific, a series of earnest

1. Does the author have a main idea, and does he or she stick to it?
2. Does the author make defensible assertions and supply adequate details to support these assertions?
3. Do the sentences and paragraphs flow smoothly?
4. Do the sentence patterns vary?
5. Is the essay relatively free of grammatical errors, punctuation errors, and misspellings?

Fig. 2. Rubric, author and date unknown.

questions implies that there is some kind of dialogue at work. That may make this rubric more effective as part of a formative process; but that sense of a dialogue is perhaps beside the point when a rubric is part of a summative and aggregated assessment. So the shift from abstract criteria to questions is not in fact a crucial one, methodologically. And in any case, we recognize again the familiar categories on the rubric and the implicit lines drawn between them. There is enough of a consensus now about these criteria that a Google search of the phrase "Thesis, organization, transitions, development, evidence, conclusion, diction & style, mechanics" turns up 37,500 hits, countless numbers of them rubrics from colleges and high schools. They are clearly in common use now as a teaching tool and as a basis for assessment. In either case, the rubrics that are commonly available from writing center websites, English departments and other humanities programs bear a family resemblance and, as far as I have seen, do not mention sublime learning.

In the literature about rubrics, we can trace their emergence to the 1961 publication from the Educational Testing Service that proposed five factors in good writing that could be isolated and used for purposes of evaluating writing. Bob Broad, in his book, *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing*, quotes them:

> *Ideas*: relevance, clarity, quantity, development, persuasiveness
> *Form*: organization and analysis
> *Flavor*: style, interest, sincerity
> *Mechanics*: specific errors in punctuation, grammar, etc.
> *Wording*: choice and arrangement of words. (6)[5]

Broad, surveying the effect of rubrics on teaching and assessing writing, goes so far as to argue that their limitations have become clear: "The age of the rubric has passed," he says: it gave us efficiency, but at the cost of truth (4). His critique of rubrics is founded on two related propositions: that they do not reflect what we actually value most in good writing; and that they contradict the real complexity of knowledge and thought (4). Another important critic of rubrics, Brian Huot, has argued that assessment of writing in particular has had "roots in a positivist epistemology" ("Toward a New Theory," 160) that is divorced from "our understandings about the nature of language, written communication, and its teaching" (162). In the place of standardized rubrics, Huot has argued for assessment criteria that are holistic and "site-based," that emerge from within specific contexts (162). Like Broad, then, he sees student writing and learning as being more complex than rubrics are able to capture. Not only are the various features of good writing interconnected, not only do they exist in shifting hierarchies, but they also depend to a surprising degree on the context in which the students are writing and learning. And "context" here is a large umbrella covering a wide range of factors, from the nature of the assignment and the course to larger factors such as the students' subcultures and social identities, the kinds of academic sup-

port available, the nature of the institution, and the prevailing community expectations of students' writing.

Huot's and Broad's critiques are cogent and persuasive. My argument here, through the lens of Blake and by implication romantic challenges to Enlightenment rationalism, extends these two critiques of the common rubric. It may be difficult for any literary scholar working today, schooled in poststructuralist radical uncertainties, to see the rubric as anything but a flawed fiction, at best, and at worst a form of surveillance, in Foucault's sense of the word: the state's intrusion into learning. At the same time, I am not wholly willing to sacrifice the rubric's usefulness—not just as an instrument for evaluating student work, but as a fundamental principle in teaching: we should make our criteria known to our students, and they should be clear and attainable; our assessments should emerge clearly from them.[6] And when we do that, the criteria probably look a lot like the rubrics quoted above.

I do, without question, want my students to learn to manage each of the aspects of an essay that these rubrics outline. I even catch myself assigning a certain moral virtue to them: so, for example, I will share with students my disdain when a literary critic willfully disregards evidence in the text, or fails to organize an argument in a way that unfolds logically. We spend a lot of time talking about what kind of thesis is worth advancing and what kind of literary evidence is not only convincing but also accurate, even true. Most days of the week, I don't need more than those points on that rubric to assess my students' work or their learning. And then sometimes I do, and when that happens, it can seem as though a crack has opened up and I am not sure what I see through it. In the case that follows, an unusual student project led me to reconsider my standard categories of assessment, not only for that assignment but for student work in general. I learned that the greater the risks I take with my teaching, the more likely the students are to escape the "same dull round" as well, and the greater the likelihood that their education and mine seem bound with an urgency that is both satisfying and unsettling. To my surprise, I also learned that a rubric could help us to reach that point.

Sergio's burning shoes

Recently, I taught a course for the second time that had previously fallen flat. The course is in Skidmore College's interdisciplinary Scribner Seminar program, part of the college's first-year experience. It was one of a cluster of eight seminars whose title was "Human Dilemmas." Of the 110 or so students in these eight seminars, about a third were admitted through our opportunity programs on full scholarship and thus came from disadvantaged backgrounds. The "Human Dilemmas" seminars aim to introduce all 110 of the students to some of the big questions addressed in a liberal arts education, and to show them how different disciplinary approaches to them complement each other. What can we know? How do we know what we know? What is a self? What is the relationship between the self and society? What is the relationship between the self and the natural world? These are the overarching questions that frame the course. Students read Plato, Peirce, Locke, Darwin, and some less canoni-

cal authors who model some approaches to these questions. Although it is not a literature course, it stresses the importance of the arts within the context of other modes of inquiry, and students write and revise frequent papers that rely on the kinds of close readings my students in literature courses also do.

"Human Dilemmas" is an immensely ambitious course and is notoriously difficult to teach, even with small class sizes that allow us to work closely with individual students. The texts are challenging and abstract; the students are in their first semester at college and are not all interested in epistemological uncertainty and Platonic metaphor; and often their papers read like high school papers: dutiful and disengaged. Because the students come from an extremely broad range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, the class can feel disjointed. After struggling through teaching it my first time, I was determined to try again and do it better. I was convinced that those big questions are inherently compelling, that the material was tough but rewarded close attention, and that this course could be a transformative experience for first-year students of any background. What seemed essential was to engage them from the very first day: to make the course feel more like a quest than a canon, to translate the questions into accessible language, to withhold some answers, to lend it a sense of adventure, and to keep it moving.

This involved a number of strategies, most of them pedagogical decisions aimed at engaging the students in multiple ways. I instituted a service-learning component to the seminar, with grant support from the AAC&U "Bringing Theory to Practice" program; I devised classroom activities that prevented them from sitting in the same seat every class and compelled them to interact and collaborate and talk about the readings in the context of their social identities and differences.

One strategy in particular had major consequences for the students' final papers and for my assessment of them. Our campus has an unusual museum, the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, that actively seeks to engage students and faculty in and through the curriculum. The artist Dario Robleto was due to open a show there early that fall (2008). A catalogue was available ahead of time, and something about his work just seemed exactly right for the material in the seminar.[7] The curator, Ian Berry, was willing to give the students a preview of the show with a close look at several of the works, and Robleto was willing to meet with them when his show was opening. This felt like a leap of faith: I couldn't be sure that the students would respond to the works, that the artist would connect with them, that the works would in fact seem as closely related to our topics as I thought—or that this experience would enhance their learning in any way. But there was something about those objects that I thought might speak directly to them, if they, as a class, could get past their shared resistance and skepticism. In particular, Robleto's work uses highly charged objects from everyday life that he processes in various ways and then combines into artifacts that work both metaphorically and metonymically with a peculiar power. For example, he may grind human bones or vinyl LPs to a powder and then bind the powder so that he can sculpt objects. He may introduce "authentic" objects, the detritus of past wars

or personal events: bullet casings, letters, hair, objects from his family, uniform buttons. The artifacts' titles list their components, and read almost like poems. His works in this particular exhibition had a common thematic thread about war, its personal and societal costs and dilemmas. Robleto is unafraid of affect, and looks for an emotional response in the viewer. This quality, combined with the sheer originality, beauty and creepiness of his works, makes them immediately accessible.[8]

Taking Robleto's objects as a starting point, the final assignment for my seminar asked the students to create objects of their own, using both metaphor and metonymy to communicate about one of the dilemmas we had studied; they also wrote a paper documenting and analyzing their objects in the light of some of the texts we had read together. They were asked to "process" at least one of the components in a way that could be read metaphorically: to pulverize, cook, chew, weave, burn, dissolve, glue, or otherwise change it, and to read that change as a mental as well as physical process. They took this part of the assignment on with such enthusiasm that one of my challenges became to save some of their more precious objects—ancestral documents, old love letters and photographs—from being destroyed. My hope in writing this assignment was that working with objects that are intrinsically powerful to them would help them to understand in more vivid terms the abstractions that we had been grappling with in the readings. Further, I was gambling that Robleto's works are themselves so provocative, and the museum setting so dramatically *visual*, that many of them would step into that space with some excitement and energy that could translate to their work.

I'm describing this assignment at length in part because I took such pleasure in designing it: it was, for me, unorthodox, exploratory, risky—maybe even, in Blake's sense, Poetic. As for the students' projects, let me begin by describing one. Sergio Hernandez took a pair of his shoes, filled them with dirt mixed with dead leaves and various shredded materials, took them outside in the snow, and lit them on fire. He filmed the shoes burning on his cell phone, then created a PowerPoint file with the burning shoes and an Avril Lavigne soundtrack, her song "Innocence." Sergio, the son of Mexican migrant workers and an extremely bright, motivated student, had said once in class, "If you're Mexican, everyone assumes that you walked here." That sentence came back to me when I watched his shoes burning. These were shoes of his from high school; they did not have an extraordinary history, at least none that he told us about. But I knew that he felt already, after four months of college, that he had changed a lot, and that the readings we had done for our seminar had been unsettling for him (as for all the students). When he talked about the project, he said, "Shoes are like knowledge. You walk in them a way, and then they wear out and you move on to a new pair." His paper elaborates on that point, with a particular focus on epistemology and Charles Sanders Peirce.

Without dramatizing this point too much, I want to describe what it feels like to watch Sergio's shoes burning. Nothing about this film clip is captured well by the rubrics I have quoted above, but I do not know that I have ever

seen quite such a powerful piece of student work. What they call to mind is again from Blake:

> Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
> In the forests of the night;
> What immortal hand or eye,
> Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
> In what distant deeps or skies
> Burnt the fire of thine eyes!
> On what wings dare he aspire?
> What the hand, dare sieze the fire? (24)

It is all but impossible for me to experience these lines the way I did when I first read them some forty years ago, but the *matter* of them here is still familiar. It's what Emily Dickinson means when she says that poetry is what takes the top of her head off.[9] And that image itself echoes Job 4.13-17: "Then a Spirit passed before my face: the hair of my flesh stood up…."[10] Morton Paley (546) quotes this passage from Job in his reading of "The Tyger," and goes on to comment on the sublime force of fire in this poem: "The destructive fire of Wrath is also the energy of purification.… Blake's furnace is a perpetual source of power for transforming a dead world" (550).[11] Because transformation also means loss, because a new world also means the loss of an old one, to look at this power squarely and acknowledge its force may be to fear it as much as to welcome it. Sergio's burning shoes, crackling with flames, posed in a slightly vulnerable way with one toe touching the other, can seem both terrifying and beautiful.

Sergio's artifact is not alone in conveying such intensity; the students were remarkably engaged in producing these objects, and they created some startling, eerie, thought-provoking artifacts. Zachary Peyser filled a milk bottle from his grandmother's farm with soil from his future grave site and surrounded it with a triptych of x-rays of his skull. Kristin Zhou, a first-generation Chinese-American, used a scale to "weigh" the relative importance of her two cultures, their currencies and their music, burning two CDs until they melted into one another at the overlap. Stephen Bissonnette made a paper boat out of his Selective Service letter and put in it a rosary and wallet that his great-grandparents had brought when they emigrated from Portugal. The students' papers were uneven, reflecting to some extent their varying pre-college preparation; but all of them represented profound engagement with some of the central issues in "Human Dilemmas." It seemed that the one point on that first rubric that did apply, universally, was "shows originality and creativity." For most, I would need to go further and add something like the "*Je ne sais quoi*" category, except that the phrase is too flip for the earnestness of the students' work, and the awe that I still feel looking at photographs of it. This project went well beyond a "certain something" in the students' creativity; they were looking backward at who they had been, and forward at who they were becoming, in a way that seemed urgent to them.

And all of this feels inadequate as a description, because I cannot capture the way that the project culminated a semester of challenging readings, discussions that were sometimes uncomfortable, many moments of resistance or unhappiness, much slapdash work and skepticism, and occasional glimpses, revelations, of how it all fit together in their minds. That context is essential to understanding and conveying what is at work, for example, in the pair of burning shoes. Recent scholarship on contexts and their role in rubrics and assessment provides a conceptual framework for understanding just how essential— but also complex—contexts are. When, for example, a student who is bi-cultural and for whom English is a second language is struggling to express herself, her "errors," in the context of this assignment, can also be read as signs of her lived experience, her courage and her progress. In a sense, each student's context requires—and to some extent surely receives from the faculty, even if we have trouble articulating it—a private rubric that parallels the public one.[12]

In part because this assignment was as foreign to me as it was to my students, I created a rubric for it and distributed it beforehand. They had seemed puzzled by the assignment, nervous about how it would be graded, and hesitant to launch into it, and I thought a rubric would reassure them that the assignment was indeed to be taken at its word. At the same time, I didn't know what to expect from them, and was charting new territory myself (see fig. 3). It did prove to be immensely useful when I evaluated the students' projects and papers.

Your projects will be evaluated according to the following criteria. In each case, the possible answers are: very well; well; somewhat; not very well; not at all.

I. Objects
1. How well does the object express the dilemma it is meant to represent?
2. How well does it incorporate materials from different sources that embody aspects of that dilemma in your life?
3. How well does it present materials that have been processed in a way that is metaphorically suggestive?
4. How well do the elements of the object come together into a whole?
5. How well do the object and the dilemma it embodies relate to concepts we have studied in the course?

II. Commentaries
1. How well does the commentary explain the object and its representation of a dilemma?
2. How well does it describe the processes used to create it, including any metaphors or metonymies?
3. How well does the commentary draw connections between this particular dilemma and each of the readings that it integrates?
4. How well does the commentary draw connections to your own life?
5. How clearly and effectively is the commentary written?

III. Grading
Work that earns a grade in the A range will be marked "very well" in most cases above. "Well" translates to the B range; "Somewhat" to the C range, etc. This evaluation is an inexact science. The categories above are not equally weighted. Most important are: conceptual richness and clarity; connections to the readings; and creative thought.

Fig. 3. Rubric evaluating the Museum of Dilemmas projects, Sarah Webster Goodwin, date unknown.

If I had at hand a rubric on assignments, to assess how well they serve students' learning, I would check the boxes saying that this assignment clearly served the students' engagement, reflection, and sense of intellectual community. Their papers lacked the polish and shape of the conventional, revised expository essay, but they were rich in some qualities that ranked high in this particular course: the ability to draw connections among the readings and concepts, and to see how the abstract issues we were considering manifest themselves in our actual lives. To use Blake's phrase, the work they did, and my experience of it, were about as far from the "same dull round" of the classroom as I can imagine. The rubric, in this instance, emphasized creativity and the specific processes within which they would have considerable freedom. In doing this, and in assuring the students that the assignment was to be taken seriously in every detail, and that I would be looking closely at their work, the rubric seems to have freed them to do extraordinary things.

Crucial to the success of this culminating assignment were several factors. The students had the opportunity to meet the artist, and Dario Robleto's passion, affability, genuine interest in them, and generosity in talking about his works and his life gave them the chance to feel like insiders in the museum and to understand the full scope of Robleto's ambition. His works are inherently powerful because of the materials he uses: he represents extremes of life and death and emotions. All of this helped to engage the students. But I also think an important factor was my own excited uneasiness about the assignment. It took me into new terrain, and I even found myself wishing I could do it myself. The project, I insisted to the students, was not a work of art and would not be evaluated as one; with its accompanying paper, it was both a visual and a verbal conceptual response to Robleto's works and our readings. My own sense that this assignment was a risk and that a lot was at stake provided an important part of the context for them. They were responding not only to Robleto and the readings, but to me, and their work taught me to take more seriously the ways that the dialogue between teacher and student informs their work. If there was a rubric that faculty could use to assess their assignments, here are some things that might be on it:

1. The topic is engaging for the faculty member as well as the students.
2. The topic leads the students to take risks, to learn some new concepts and to synthesize familiar ones.
3. The topic has a certain *je ne sais quoi*. And most importantly,
4. The topic continues the dialogue between the teacher and the students in ways that are not fully scripted, channeled or contained.

Dialogue, Innocence and Experience

Nurse's Song

When the voices of children are heard on the green
And laughing is heard on the hill,
My heart is at rest within my breast
And everything else is still

Then come home my children, the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise
Come come leave off play, and let us away
Till the morning appears in the skies

No no let us play, for it is yet day
And we cannot go to sleep
Besides in the sky, the little birds fly
And the hills are all coverd with sheep

Well well go & play till the light fades away
And then go home to bed
The little ones leaped & shouted & laugh'd
And all the hills ecchoed

William Blake, *Songs of Innocence* (15)

If we read this poem as a scene of instruction, as many of Blake's *Songs* are, it seems to offer a benign view of teaching, a sort of "Summerhill" pedagogy, child-centered, flexible, and communal. These children are a long way from putting pen to paper, and the Nurse is an even longer way from designing a rubric to describe her expectations of their learning. In the world of this poem, no one is worried about whether the village school will meet the state standards, nor whether these children will find jobs when they graduate or be able to perform adequately in them if they do. And yet I would argue that the poem—especially in the context of Blake's work as a whole, which allows us to extend our interpretation pretty far—offers a real and feasible model for the classroom and a way to make room for sublime learning.

Summarized briefly, the pedagogical reading of this poem might look like this: The Nurse possesses adult knowledge—of night, of time, of death, and of everything that they import into the world of the poem; she knows that the children need to learn these things. But when she instructs them, she also listens to their response, and she learns something even more capacious from them: that they, and she, are part of larger natural cycles that can become a source of even greater knowledge and understanding. The poem presents two kinds of sublime knowledge: the terrifying one, and a reassuring one. Ending as it does on the idea of echo, in which Nurse, children, sheep and hills all

echo each other, and in which the poem's own rhymes seem to extend into our reading space, this *Nurse's Song* emphasizes reciprocity, dialogue, learning as a mutually reinforcing undertaking. With those qualities, our collective learning reaches to the farthest point: an understanding and acceptance of our human constraints, and a celebration of the ways that we can escape the "same dull round." Blake presents an alternative scene of instruction in the "Nurse's Song" from *Experience*, and in it he suggests that without those qualities of dialogue and reciprocity, we have no resources to face human losses and our fear of death:

> Then come home my children, the sun is gone down
> And the dews of night arise
> Your spring & your day, are wasted in play
> And your winter and night in disguise. (23)

This Nurse speaks essentially to herself, and from the children she hears "whisperings" rather than shouts of joy. The affect is all negative and inward-turning. I would venture to say that every teacher has moments like hers in the classroom, when we blame the students for their ignorance, silently envy them their youth, and distrust them in fundamental ways. We probably all carry both models of teaching within us, along with others. What we may not do, though, is consider what is at stake if we do not open ourselves to the kind of learning Blake is talking about.[13]

We want our students not only to produce facsimiles of "good writing," but to be "engaged." This means that they are willing to work hard, and also that they care about the work: that they have positive affect—that they experience joy. And perhaps also that they have opportunities to express negative affect, candidly, as part of the planned, anticipated learning experience. In these two poems, Blake suggests that our pedagogical thinking may start from one place (the poems share three lines), and then reach a fork: in one direction lie open and honest exchange, a transformation on both sides, shared pleasure, and a point that touches our deepest longing, our wish for our learning to be meaningful in the face of death. In the other direction lie "disguise," a perpetuation of roles and constraints, isolation, and an inability to touch together the core of what matters.

In an actual classroom, we can't approach sublime learning every Monday, Wednesday and Friday; if we did, it would become the "same dull round." But I believe that my best teaching, and my students' best learning, happens when I sense an openness in the students, and they in me, and we go to an edge and peer over it.

Not only isn't there a stable rubric for this kind of learning, it is singularly difficult to measure. When does measurement offer a clarifying and liberating constraint, a usefully defining boundary, and when does it prevent us from escaping the machinery of the quotidian? What does this escape look like, when it happens? We may not be able to define it in advance, precisely because it pushes beyond what is known. "Known" is a relative term: we feel our stu-

dents' exhilaration when their conscious knowledge expands, when they are working at the edge of what they can articulate. It may involve paradox, taboo, conflict; it may elude logic and be expressed best by metaphor or metonymy; it may be tentative, contingent, fleeting. When it happens in our students, it has usually happened in us at about the same time: a risk, a discovery, something we didn't know before. It may be more likely to happen if we invite it, by putting it on the rubric.

Assessment

How much of this dimension of the rubric in the classroom translates to the scene of programmatic assessment? The challenge here is one of scale: if the scene of instruction in "Nurse's Song" has just one adult and a handful of children, can it be scaled up to the size of a department, a college, a university? I would propose that all of the conclusions above about rubrics in the classroom hold as well for the larger project of assessment.

In brief: assessment rubrics that are based on clear and visible goals for student learning serve the democratic and liberating function of a liberal arts education by clarifying for *all* constituents what that education is about and how the student can expect to be transformed. Assessment rubrics have their limitations: they may encourage us to overlook qualities in student work that are not on the rubric but that we do or could value; we need to build in ways to counteract this. Dialogue is essential to the creation of rubrics and assessment processes: among faculty, between faculty and students, between disciplines, even between campus constituencies and alumnae. The process of deciding what it matters to learn is ongoing and communal, and it responds to local contingencies and to shifts over time.[14] Like any rubric, those used for assessment are themselves subject to evaluation; this is part of the dialogue. And finally, rubrics may work best if they do not play it too safe. Assessments should and must bring faculty to reconsider some sacred cows. Should affect, for example, have a larger role in what we hope our students will learn? In addition to analytic acumen and proficiency in writing, should they learn to communicate visually? Do we have the courage to say that we aim for our students to be able to communicate effectively across racial identities, and to develop the pedagogies that make that possible? What are the most ambitious goals of a liberal arts education? Ambition has a place in every assessment rubric, and that may mean ferreting out unspoken assumptions and talking through strenuous differences.

If we undertake the shaping of the assessment rubric in a creative spirit, and with an ear to the ground, we may find ourselves rethinking what we want our students to learn and how they are most likely to do that. As the new Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubric for "Creative Thinking" says, the highest level of creative thinking yields work that "[a]ctively seeks out and follows through on untested and potentially risky directions or approaches …" and work that "[t]ransforms ideas or solutions into entirely new forms" (Rhodes 27). We should ask this of our students, and of ourselves: if the rubric can help the teacher learn, as well as the student,

and if it can take both to the outer edge of our understanding, it will have a Prophetic or Poetic character. As Blake wrote, "Reason or the ratio of all we have already known is not the same that it shall be when we know more."

NOTES

1   All quotations from Blake are from the Erdman edition and use Blake's eccentric spellings and punctuation.

2   See Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science*, 113 and *passim*.

3   For an elaboration of this concept of sublime learning with an emphasis on the cognitive and affective processes the learner undergoes, see Donna Heiland's essay in this volume.

4   Blake wrote of a kind of dialectic between the "Prolific" and the "Devouring," mutually dependent beings or forces of creativity and consumption: "Thus one portion of being, is the Prolific, the other, the Devouring: to the devourer it seems as if the producer was in his chains, but it is not so, he only takes portions of existence and fancies that the whole. But the Prolific would cease to be Prolific unless the Devourer as a sea received the excess of his delights" (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 39).

5   According to Broad, "And thus was born what became the standard, traditional, five-point rubric, by some version of which nearly every large-scale assessment of writing since 1961 has been strictly guided" (6).

6   Or, as Grant Wiggins has put it: "A liberal arts assessment system has to be based on known, clear, public, non-arbitrary standards, and criteria. There is no conceivable way for the student to be empowered and to become a masterful liberal artist if the criteria and standards are not known in advance. The student is kept fundamentally off-balance, intellectually and morally, if the professor has a secret test and secret scoring criteria."

7   See Berry, ed., *Dario Robleto: Alloy of Love* for more information on the exhibition.

8   To view some of his works, see the selected pieces on the D'Amelio Terras Gallery website.

9   "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry." Reported by T. W. Higginson in an undated letter to his wife (Halio 41).

10 Quoted by Paley (546), no edition given, but the text is from the King James version.

11 As Paley also notes (550), Blake illustrated this sentence on plate 9 of his illuminated *Book of Job*. For Paley, in this poem, printed in 1793, Blake is in some sense justifying the terror of the French Revolution. But it is clearly more than a simple allegory; it is a scene of sublime learning.

12 See also Huot and Williamson, "Rethinking Portfolios for Evaluating Writing: Issues of Assessment and Power," and Ball, "Expanding the Dialogue on Culture as a Critical Component When Assessing Writing."

13   My reading of these poems is indebted to Heather Glen's classic book, where she notes the way the "Nurse's Song" from *Innocence* is a dialogue in which both the children and the nurse listen to and echo each other (19-23). For more on how Blake's *Songs* embodied critiques of contemporary pedagogies, see Richardson.

14   See Morgaine's "Developing Rubrics: Lessons Learned," in Rhodes (11-14).

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BIOGRAPHY

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POSTHUMANIST MEASURES: ELEPHANTS, ASSESSMENT, AND THE RETURN OF CREATIVITY
LUCINDA COLE

> I don't pretend to know what art is, and I don't know why people believe in it, but I know that they do. It's a question of faith, maybe, needing to believe in something bigger than ourselves…. But one thing I'm fairly sure of: if something makes you ask the question, Is it art?, there's a very good chance that it is.
>
> Melamid, *When Elephants Paint: The Quest of Two Russian Artists to Save the Elephants of Thailand* (49)

PEGGY MAKI CLAIMS THAT THE first phase of assessment is reaching some consensus about "collective expectations for student learning" (33), a daunting task in any environment, one especially tricky for the humanities, which seems to be suffering a collective identity crisis partially fueled by present economic realities. Even the idea that education is somehow transformative is now being decried as a useless shibboleth of Arnoldian rhetoric, as one after another scholar asks us to overcome our revulsion to all things financial and consider how corporatism (Kirp), globalization and hyperprofessionalization (Donoghue), social conservatism (Newfield), and misguided utilitarianism on the part of faculty themselves (Fish) have turned humanists into an endangered species. These institutional histories, following the model of Gerald Graff's 1987 *Professing Literature*, reinforce the idea that humanities scholars have done a very poor job of defining and defending the value of the liberal arts. In his provocatively named *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*, Frank Donoghue outlines two ways that humanities faculty can "resist their extinction": first, while acknowledging our powerlessness within "an increasingly global economy and an increasingly transactional economy of wealth," we can challenge the idea that career-oriented educational institutions will necessarily lead to secure jobs and a better quality of life for students, without at the same time suggesting that "we have something superior to offer" them (137). Second, having admitted our collective irrelevance, we can study our own institutional histories, an effort that, ideally, will

thwart the dangerous tendency we have to "romanticize" our work, thereby allowing us to adopt a perspective on academic labor that could somehow help "forestall" our "own extinction" (138).

Fish, Kirp, Donoghue, Newfield, and others have done much to articulate the contours of an educational industry whose business practices are increasingly modeled on those of a tarnished, post-2008 corporate America. They have also indirectly created a valuable context for understanding the wariness that many of our colleagues bring to assessment initiatives, initiatives that are easily and perhaps justifiably regarded as yet another symptom of an economically induced standardization of knowledge and learning. Resistance to assessment among literary people is notorious and usually quite articulate. One of my colleagues, for example, refused to participate in an assessment survey I circulated, claiming that she has "reservations about the particular discourses [the survey] relies upon" and that she has "made a professional decision not to participate in them." Another accused me, good-naturedly, of "authenticating a discourse which is to [her] repulsive." While such direct responses bespeak a naked aversion to assessment and a refusal to cross some real or imagined political line, in my experience (first as department chair, then as interim director of college writing) resistance to assessment is more often passive, such as people "forgetting" to turn in writing samples for evaluation. Generally, I think, our colleagues are ambivalent about assessment, trying to cooperate with what are perceived as institutional imperatives while being skeptical about their source and value.

Within literary studies, the general problem of whether or not assessment is an over-reaching tentacle of corporate America is further complicated by some of our own foundational values having been systematically dismantled, or at least thoroughly deconstructed, over the past forty years. "Creativity" was one of the first Enlightenment legacies to fall (or to take a pounding) under the pressures of 1980s and 1990s poststructuralism; a collection of essays entitled *The Anti-Aesthetic*, which I remember being thrilled to find on the shelves of my graduate school library in 1983, heralded and typified the kind of Marxian, postmodernist, feminist, and postcolonial analysis that would result in two generations of literary scholars defining their work as being radically different from—and sometimes even opposed to—that of artists and creative writers. Creativity, in short, became cast as a form of mystification from which the professional literary scholar was supposed to distinguish herself. It is therefore not surprising that, under new economic pressures, creativity's familiar place within mission statements has now also come under suspicion. In *Save the World on Your Own Time*, Stanley Fish, touting the value of critical thinking, warns professors of literature that we should be doing two things and two things only: introducing students to new lines of inquiry, and teaching critical thinking and writing: "I'm all for moral, civic, and creative capacities," he claims, "but I'm not sure that there is much I or anyone else can do as a teacher to develop them" (11).

Fish's words are intended to display a bracing dose of realism, but this critique comes at an auspicious time in the development of "creativity" theory

and practice. "More than 50 colleges have decided to offer creative writing majors in recent years," says one source, an increase coming at a time "when the number of English majors as a whole is decreasing" (Kaufman et al. 10). In the past twenty years, moreover, while we were reading and re-reading Freud, research on creativity became a multidisciplinary endeavor; drawing upon studies in medicine, psychology, education, neuroscience, and ethology,[1] thinkers from other disciplines have been attempting to bring creativity into the realm of empirical analysis. Creativity has even given rise to its own assessment industry. As the authors of a recent book on creativity assessment point out, researchers of creativity, "believe that creativity is a natural candidate to supplement traditional measures of ability and achievement" (Kaufman et al. 10); creativity was "one of six non-cognitive areas that Mayer (2001) recommended as being valuable candidates for new measures" and one of five "qualities singled out in a study of potential additional measures to the GRE" (11).

In conjunction with an ongoing assessment project, I persuaded 11 of my 18 full-time colleagues, few of whom had demonstrated any particular inclination towards the several assessment imperatives bearing down upon us, to complete an in-house survey entitled "Creativity Assessment." Without being sure what specific attitudes would emerge, I expected to find patterns, and did. Those who did not balk at the language of assessment expressed predictable discomfort with the amorphous quality of the word "creativity," which I had not defined. One after another attempted to think about it in ways that no longer smacked of a tainted romantic aesthetics. When asked whether or not they discuss creativity in their gateway courses to the major, for example, they responded with great care:

> "[The word is] a bit too loaded, because we have to work against the common notion of creativity as 'absence of structure.'"

> "I try to demystify the concept, if possible, and then revive it as a critical skill."

> "Not that word … because [the students] don't associate it with learning. Creativity for them often means a bolt from the blue. They think one creates *ex nihilo*—I'm going to hit it big! My job is to demonstrate that creativity comes out of a process."

A poet who also writes poststructuralist critical texts, perhaps traumatized by the culture wars of a previous generation, attached a warning: "I hope this survey is intended for responsible purposes and run by sane colleagues who know that creativity and intellectual ambition are not opposed." His was one of many attempts to reinterpret the concept, to rescue "creativity" from its fuzzy and often pedagogically ineffectual associations.

Despite this trepidation about the word "creativity," however, the question provoking the most consensus in my survey was this: "Do you believe a component of good scholarship is 'creativity'?" Eighty percent "strongly believe" that it is. Most also "strongly believe" that readers of journals considered "cre-

ativity" in evaluating work for publication, and that some English majors are more "creative" that others. This consistency, along with some telling contradictions to be discussed shortly, suggests that whatever the economic, political, and epistemological problems surrounding assessment as a practice, such problems are preceded and complicated for literary scholars by a different set of considerations, notably our collective and still-vexed relationship to the aesthetic. Consequently, if we are ever to reach some consensus about "collective expectations for student learning," we have to face—again—the aesthetic and its paradoxes, this time from a different vantage point than that offered by poststructuralist theory in the 1980s. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how our tacit if sometimes embarrassed understanding of the contradictory nature of the aesthetic may affect our attitudes towards assessment, not to mention fears of our own collective "extinction." In order to explore these relationships I begin in an unlikely place, with elephants who paint.

Where Is Creativity?

Most North Americans have probably seen evidence of popular culture's fascination with elephant art. *When Elephants Paint: The Quest of Two Russian Artists to Save the Elephants of Thailand* was published in 2000, and in 2002 the television show *60 Minutes* broadcasted "Elephant Painters," Bob Simon's segment on the efforts of Russian performance artists Komar and Melamid. The video of Hong, a female pachyderm at the Maetaman Conservation Camp, remains one of YouTube's most-watched films, at last count viewed over four million times ("Original Elephant Painting"). In this eight and a half-minute video, Hong painstakingly draws a portrait of an elephant holding a flower (see fig. 1). Prints of the elephant paintings may be purchased through the website Exotic World Gifts, a portion of whose profits go back to the camps in Thailand. Hong and her fellow artists work in a nation which, according to its own tourism authority website, has been "turned upside down" (Lair). In 1850, there were an estimated 100,000 domesticated elephants and approximately 6 million people; today, there are 2,700 domesticated elephants and 64 million Thais. During the 1970s and 1980s, a growing foreign demand for teak and other hardwoods, coupled with internal conversion of forest land to agriculture, resulted in the rapid deforestation of Thailand; a 1989 ban on logging left most of the domesticated elephant population in Thailand without a habitat and without a
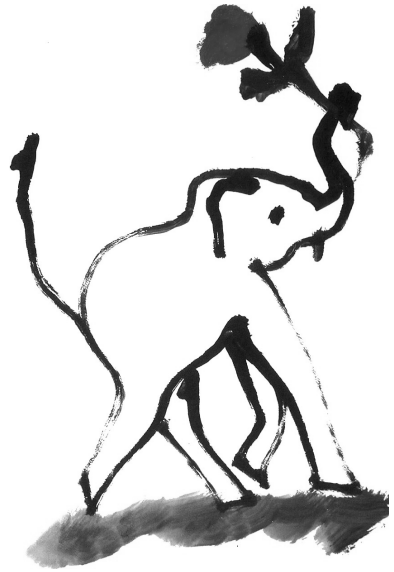
Fig. 1. Elephant painting, Hong, date unknown; Reprinted with permission from ExoticWorldGifts.com.

legal job. The tourism industry—Thailand is visited by some 10 to 11 million tourists annually—helped supply both. It is estimated that some 70% of domesticated elephants are now engaged in some aspect of the tourist industry. Most of these elephants live in over 60 tourist camps, and an increasing number of them paint (Lair).

These elephants and their mahouts raise a host of important and interrelated issues about human/animal relations and humans in relation to a changing natural world, among them the nature and value of creativity. Below the YouTube video of Hong are attached some eight thousand viewer comments which fall into three groups: those who think this painting is sign of elephant creativity, emotion, and/or intelligence; those who think the video is fake; and those who believe the video demonstrates little except the elephant's capacity to be manipulated or controlled. "The painting," writes one observer, "shows no creativity on the animal's part, as he's just following the prompts to receive rewards" (Bogsnarth). Implicit in this latter view is a notion of the aesthetic as a spontaneous, unprovoked behavior which, especially in the 1970s, structured, positively or negatively, most discussions of animals and art. Some readers might remember an elephant named Siri whose unprompted, abstract drawings became famous then. Siri's trainer David Gucwa enlisted enlisted journalist James Ehmann, who sent copies of the drawings to scientists and artists for their interpretation. While a few people noted in these drawings signs of an artistic disposition—Willem de Kooning remarked, famously, "That's a damned talented elephant"—most did not. Donald Griffin, the researcher who first discovered echolocation in bats, said he found the drawings "intriguing" but because the drawings are free-form he "wouldn't want to go very far in inferring consciousness": "short of clear representation," he writes, "I don't know what the devil you could make of it" (qtd. in Gucwa and Ehmann 137). The relationship between consciousness and "art" reappears, forty years later, in consideration of Hong's work but this time, the ability to draw representationally *excludes* the elephant painting from being regarded as "art." Consider, for example, how Snopes.com—the great demystifier of Internet lore—responds to a viewer who, having seen the video of Hong painting an elephant, wants to know if the video is "true":

> it is "true" in the sense that it represents the real phenomenon of elephants who have learned to paint, with the caveat that "painting" in this sense means the animals outline and color specific drawings they've been taught to replicate (rather than abstractly making free-form portraits of whatever tickles their pachydermic fancies at the moment). (Mikkelson and Mikkelson)

This author implies that only "free-form" painting could be taken as a sign of consciousness, as something other than mechanical behavioralist prompting.

Acknowledging similar contradictions in readings of human art, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a psychologist at Claremont Graduate University, has long

argued that rather than asking *what* is creativity, we should be asking a different question: *where* is creativity? His shift in emphasis from individual works of art to their place within in a system is intended (like the work of Pierre Bourdieu) to provide a description of creativity within specific cultural and historical milieus: "what we call creative," Csikszentmihalyi insists, "is never the result of individual action alone" but the product of three "main shaping forces":

> a set of social institutions, or *field*, that selects from the variations produced by individuals those that are worth preserving; a stable cultural *domain* that will preserve and transmit the selected new ideas or forms to the following generations; and finally the *individual*, who brings about some changes in the domain, a change that the field will consider to be creative. ("Implications" 325)

Because creativity results from an interaction among the individual, the field, and the domain, "it is impossible," he insists, to tell whether or not an object or idea is creative by simply looking at it. "Without a historical context, one lacks the reference points necessary to determine if the product is in fact an adaptive innovation" (326). In this view, the people who respond to Hong's video on YouTube are part of a phenomenon, and their judgments are preceded and partially shaped by a network of actors, among them the mahouts or elephant trainers, visiting artists such as Komar and Melamid, patrons, agents, curators, museum directors, Internet consumers who buy the prints, and a host of animal rights activists who, in conjunction with artists like Komar and Melamid, have been persistent and effective in their attempts to represent elephant painting as the ultimate outsider art. Social agreement, writes Csikszentmihalyi, "is one of the constitutive aspects of creativity, without which the phenomenon would not exist" (327).

Among the several advantages of Csikszentimihalyi's systems approach is that removing creativity from individual consciousness allows us to treat it, as we do "reason," as a specific cultural and historical phenomenon, one of whose functions has been to police the border between civilized and uncivilized, human and nonhuman. Artistic "consciousness" may have once stood as the last mark of humanness, but from a system theory's perspective, elephant art—indeed, any art—is "creative" to the extent that it is regarded as a novel variation, one "instrumental in revising and enlarging the symbolic domain of the visual arts" (326).[2] Because consciousness is no longer a determinative issue, the debates about motivated and unmotivated behavior, interested and disinterested judgment have underwritten many versions of aesthetic theory that can now be recast as a function of the aesthetic system itself. If, for example, one wanted to argue that Thailand's elephants exhibited in their painting a "natural" behavior which German scholars (or any reader of phenomenology) would recognize as *Spiel*, there is evidence. People who work with elephants report that pachyderms, both in captivity and the wild, pick up sticks and draw figures in the dirt, perhaps as a way of relieving boredom, perhaps as a positively pleasurable behavior (Gucwa and Ehmann 39-40). If one wanted to

argue, alternatively, that the elephants are simply following the requests of their trainers, that too would be possible to do. Hong, after all, paints slightly different versions of the same two or three pictures over and over again; for some of us (although not for Andy Warhol) such repetition signifies positive proof of mimicry. The important point here is that the problematization of the relationship between the artist and his or her product turns out to be one of the means through which the aesthetic ensures its own reproduction. Within systems theory, then, the question of creativity continues to have serious—even ontological—implications, but those cannot be addressed primarily in terms of the relationship between an individual (human or elephant) and his or her work of art.

The Disappearing Mahout

Let me return to the literature classroom. My "Creativity Assessment" survey was one stage in a collaborative study of the only required course for our English major at the University of Southern Maine, ENG 245, "Introduction to Literary Studies." This course was established in 1992 as part of a Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grant to revise our undergraduate English major, a project that took about five years. We all have slightly different accounts of why ENG 245 was created but most would agree that a spate of hires in the late 1980s and early 1990s resulted in more theory-focused and theory-driven upper-division courses; we needed something that would introduce new English majors to different interpretive approaches. One third of the department teaches ENG 245, and it is the only literature course for which we have developed anything that resembles clear learning outcomes, although these are really more like guidelines: the course should emphasize close reading skills, introduce students to at least four different theoretical approaches, treat literature both before and after 1800, etc. Most people who teach ENG 245 do not list on their syllabi that manageable group of course goals that assessment officers, believing that students will not learn what they are not explicitly expected to learn, desire and promote. Since 1992, we have met annually to discuss ENG 245, agreeing every year that it tries to do too much, admitting that students who define themselves as creative writers tend not to perform well, and wondering if we should institute an alternative to—or prerequisite for—the course. So far both the course and the major remain unchanged.

Given its peculiar position within our curriculum, ENG 245 bears the burden of introducing students not only to an important set of skills but perhaps also to a particular set of values. My survey and related interviews were partly an effort to get faculty to articulate these. It quickly became apparent that, despite the lack of a shared set of systematically and collectively generated learning outcomes for ENG 245, my department was more or less in agreement that the course should teach critical thinking—often described, Graff-like, as introducing students to a set of disciplinary codes—and should also encourage a particular sensibility, variously defined:

> "I'm trying to get my students to have a type of experience, to see themselves as informed observers."

> "I'm teaching a certain kind of open-mindedness."

> "I want students to find pleasure in analysis."

> "I want to see insight and engagement in students…. But I want them to work within the conventions, traditions, and conceptual frameworks of the course and the field, which they often see as a restriction on their innovation."

> "I encourage them to become *bricoleurs*, to tinker with ideas, to make connections between seemingly unlike things."

> "My goal is to get engagement; my courses are set up to get students to demonstrate they can put things together in an interesting way."

These statements use different metaphors for describing the ideal learning experience. The "values" are recognizable as the usual somewhat nebulous by-products of traditional liberal and aesthetic education, slightly revised to emphasize critical analysis: students are encouraged to put "things together in an interesting way" or to make "connections between seemingly unlike things." Some terminology is drawn from diversity discourse ("open-mindedness"), some from pedagogical theory ("engagement"), some from structuralism and poststructuralism ("*bricoleurs*") but the statements are alike in representing this desired experience and accompanying subjectivity as the result of a complex process and cultural system.

First, for most respondents, creativity is perceived as being what assessment professionals call "domain specific," a quality that emerges—if it emerges at all—after lengthy exposure to a given field.[3] Thus whereas nobody who responded to my survey thought creativity was "very important" to their method of evaluation in introductory courses on literature, in 200-level courses, historical period courses, and senior seminars, increasingly they treated creativity "as an important part of the grading criteria." As one of my colleagues explains:

> Everything for me depends on the assumption that students are entering a discipline. They have to learn the codes. But any artisan knows you can be creative with codes; otherwise all chairs would look the same. The more experienced member of the discipline will recognize the codes at work, although he or she may not always be able to show this to someone who is not in the discipline.

Creativity means recognizing the rules, recombining them, and transcending them; it is conditional upon having internalized rules apparent in work whose

value is partly dependent upon its difference from what came before. From this perspective, creativity is a kind of divergent thinking, domain-specific knowledge from which deviations may occur.

Second, for many of the respondents, this idea that creativity is part of a domain-specific process is built on top of a self-contradictory, psychologizing model of the aesthetic; we are *both* spontaneously, naturally producing artists *and* the products of careful training. One of the more telling moments in my interviews, then, was in response to a series of questions about whether or not creativity, however they defined it, "could be taught." Four thought it could, but most noted their discomfort with the question: "We provide a context to channel people into doing creative things," said one professor; "we don't tell them what to do." "Creativity can be modeled," said another; "it can be fostered, not taught." While it cannot "be taught, it can be unleashed." Unleashed, fostered, channeled, modeled: all of these verbs presuppose a pre-existent something located, presumably, somewhere in the student, which we can bring "out."

In a paradoxical understanding which, I think, is peculiar to the aesthetic and to literary pedagogy, the opposition between work and play, training and insight, does not present itself as a problem to be resolved but as a formative dialectic. Once human consciousness is removed from the equation, the lines of this aesthetic tension stand out in bold relief. The Exotic World Gifts website includes a link to a list of questions and answers about elephant art, one of which is "How do you determine which kinds of work an elephant will paint?"

> We must see their work and whether they are good at lines or dots. Then it is discussed with their mahouts to see the possibilities of what they think are the elephant's strongest style. The mahout must learn and understand that style of painting he chooses for the elephant and know how to draw this himself before he can train his elephant. Moreover, the mahouts need to learn how to mix color and how to select the appropriate color from books or professional artists. This makes the artwork much more developed. ("Frequently Asked Questions")

This description states in more direct language the presence of the creative field—what Csikszentmihalyi defines as "all those persons who can affect the structure of a domain"—and how part of our function is to "pass on the specialized symbolic information to the next generation" ("Implications" 330). Significantly, however, it does so in ways that preserve a sense of elephant agency and individuality—note the emphasis upon being "good at lines or dots"—even while it stresses the role of the mahout in developing the elephants' "natural" style. This characterization of the pedagogical relationship between the elephant and mahout strikes me as being more or less identical to that of colleagues who claim, as I would, that creativity can be "modeled" but not "taught." Being preserved in both cases is the formative role of the profes-

sor/mahout; being denied, however, is some Lockean notion of *tabula rasa* upon which the professor or mahout merely inscribes.

This formative dialectic brings with it an ideal pedagogical structure: the disappearing preceptor. Vanishing pedagogical presence is demonstrated nicely in the YouTube video. Hong's mahout appears only in the first minute; he walks out with the elephant, setting up the easel and box of brushes and paints. The hand of the mahout, however, is quickly removed from camera range, the audience compelled to focus upon Hong's trunk. Through purposeful and practiced brush strokes, eventually the outline of Hong's elephant drawing begins to appear. As it does, one hears the human responses her activity provokes: the tourist who (presumably) does the actual filming repeats several times "Oh … my … gosh," an amazement replicated in many of the some 8,300 comments, where the most common words are "amazing!" or "awesome!" In both cases, the event of Hong's painting produces moments of blocked speech, of disempowerment and awe, that function as markers of the sublime. Despite the illusion created by the video, however, the mahout is a full collaborator in Hong's paintings: he draws the original painting, teaches the elephant to copy it, then, in the actual performance, chooses the elephant's brushes and colors of paints. Among elephants who do more abstract work, this is how the painting proceeds:

> [The mahout] gives the brush to the elephant and maneuvers the trunk, now grasping the paint-soaked brush so that it meets the canvas. He then guides the trunk around the canvas in slow, circular movements, giving the elephant a feel for the action desired. The hope is that, after some practice and verbal encouragement, the elephant will get the hang of it, and will begin to move the brush around independently—will begin, in other words, to paint. (Komar and Melamid 44)

The mahout, from this perspective, is as much an artist as the elephant, but to the extent he does his job successfully, his hand in the final product will be minimized, even disappear.

At stake in the relationship between the elephant and the mahout is not only an affective relationship but a structural one, specific to the aesthetic domain. Structurally, the "disinterestedness" typical of aesthetic production and judgment is not only dependent, as others have argued, upon the erasure of economic motivation, but also upon the ability of the instructor to occlude the heavy hand of his or her training. Both of these principles are violated in the comments by Hong's trainer, Noi Rakchang, who says about Hong's art, "I would like my elephant to paint the Thai flag beautifully because many visitors and tour guides love it. Some guides told me to train her to draw the flag more beautifully. I will try my best training her to be more skilled" ("Frequently Asked Questions"). Stressing the local and commercial qualities of her painting, his and the tourists' role in determining what she draws, Noi Rakchang lays bare the pedagogical and the economic in ways that diminish elephant

agency and subordinate art to economic and political imperatives. The tension between motivated and unmotivated behavior, between work and play, so central to the aesthetic, threatens to collapse. While outside aesthetic discourse, this distinction matters little, in order for these paintings to be marketed as "art," as something other than mere behavioralist scratching, the lines between natural ability and careful training must be blurred—blurred not because Hong is an elephant, but because she is an artist. Otherwise, the magic is gone.

Roger Fouts, an animal ethnologist who lives with and studies a family of chimpanzees, asserts, "You don't want to destroy an enjoyable natural behavior with rewards, which will turn it into work. What you're after is the individual's creativity. In a reward situation, you end up with a trained-seal effect" (qtd. in Gucwa and Ehmann 153). Fouts's categorical contrast between "enjoyable natural behaviors" and the "trained seal effect" may put the issue too crudely for some professors of literature, but it is hard to deny a similar tension in our pedagogy. Despite our theoretical disagreements and a history of institutional conflicts outlined over twenty years ago by Gerald Graff, many of us seem to have emerged with some similar attitudes about our function as teachers. Underwriting our pedagogy is not simply an attempt to distance ourselves from a mimetic model of teaching, but to do so in ways that are (consciously or unconsciously) enabling of the aesthetic. Creativity requires its aesthetic opposite, imitation. Any aesthetic product—student essays on *Moby Dick* or elephant art—will be haunted by the possibility of copying or parroting, the "trained seal effect" by which any aesthetic endeavor can be undermined. Trepidation around the word "creativity" notwithstanding, still built into our evaluative judgments is a contrast between students who "merely" feed back codes and students who use them in more individualizing ways. Doubtless, awareness of how subtle this difference can be makes literary scholars especially nervous around pedagogical initiatives that sometimes seem to do little except encourage students to learn to respond to a given set of cues, even as we know that teaching students to demonstrate a certain control of subject matter is an important part of our jobs. As a professor of literature admitted, "You have to give good grades to students who can just parrot things back." In human pedagogy, "teaching to the test"—"What do I need to know, teacher?"—emerges as the evil twin of genuine instruction. In our reptilian aesthetic brains—in the part that allows us to say, if only to ourselves, "Man, this poem sucks"—we sense that the "A" student needs the "B" student, in much the same way that Mozart needed Salieri, and that some humans, in order to be reassured of their own species exceptionalism, need elephant "art."

Askesis, Motivation, and Assessment

In using elephants to talk about creativity, literature, and assessment, I do not mean to suggest that faculty in my department bear a merely allegorical relationship to Thailand's mahouts, and their elephants to our students. Instead this juxtaposition between elephant camps and literature classrooms is intended to emphasize two key points relevant, I think, to the contemporary discussions of assessment. First, humans and elephants alike exist in a global

economy in which creativity, far from being an immaterial mystification, is a mystification with power and even market value. Second, central to that market value is a pedagogical structure in which the hand of the instructor is necessarily minimized. By virtue of her seemingly natural performance, after all, Hong becomes endowed with individuality, a distinct self. Even if this self is a mere "reality effect," that reality effect has significant economic consequences. The elephant and her mahout no longer roam the streets. And Hong's paintings sell, so from the perspective of the Mahetaman Elephant Art and Conservation Camp, the pay-off for intense elephant "engagement" is an influx of tourist dollars which, in turn, are used to support other projects: a milk bank in Thailand, an elephant reproduction facility, a new training school for future mahouts. While the aesthetic involves a kind of labor, and while that labor is doubtless immersed in business practices over which the elephants have little control, painting pictures, in the grand scheme of things, is qualitatively different from hauling logs. So is teaching literature.

These two economies can be distinguished primarily by the perceived difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Many literary professionals bring to their teaching a particular kind of self-understanding: that teaching is not merely a job, but a mode of *askesis* typical of the aesthetic. This line of ethico-aesthetic thinking emerges pretty clearly in the later work of Foucault. In *Care of the Self* and in various seminars and interviews, Foucault uses the term "aesthetic" not in its narrow meaning as a separate sphere of existence occupied by painters, poets, and philosophers whose ideas bear an elliptical relation to material reality, but instead to signify modes of *askesis* or "technologies of the self" through which we come to see ourselves as ethical subjects. Ian Hunter, drawing on Foucault, similarly defines the aesthetic as a "distinctive way of actually conducting one's life—as a self-supporting ensemble of techniques and practices for problematizing conduct and events and bringing oneself into being as the subject of an aesthetic existence" (348). Theorized in this way, Hunter continues, the aesthetic domain may be relocated from a history of ideas (and ideology) to a history of "practices of the self":

> that is, a history of the means by which individuals have come to form themselves as the subjects of various kinds of experience and action and to endow their lives with particular kinds of significance and shape. These are the practices that Weber identifies with *Lebensführung* or the conduct of life and that Foucault describes as ethical technologies. (359)

Such practices are performative and may or may not pertain directly to an art object. While Fish, for example, does not address directly address *askesis* in *Save the World On Your Own Time*, it is possible to locate traces of this ethico-aestheticism in his argument for the value of critical analysis. "A sustained inquiry into the truth of a matter," Fish writes, "is an almost athletic experience; it may exhaust you, but it also improves you" (40). But motivation for this "experience," he insists, is necessarily intrinsic: "If you are committed to an enter-

prise and have internalized its values, you don't spend much time asking questions like 'what is this good for?' You have already answered that question by sticking with the job: it's good because it's what you like to do" (59). Fish identifies his refusal to embrace a particular political or ethical position in his classrooms as "minoritarian," which it may now be, but in departments of English, the idea that teaching is a mode of *askesis* has retained its power.[4] "Teaching," says one of my own colleagues, "is a kind of performance art. It takes a great deal of creativity to be a good teacher." "Creativity" is offered not simply as a criteria descriptor of a quality we hope to find in a student paper; instead, it is something many of us, even those critical of traditional aesthetic discourse, need to believe that we are, and do. In this regard, for many professors teaching and learning are partially driven by knowledges intrinsic to the field and partially—though we less often discuss this aspect—by intrinsic motivation, by motives that are perceived (correctly or incorrectly) as coming from "within" (Nickerson 412; Collins and Amabile 300).

Our historical relationship to aesthetic discourse is still applicable in addressing faculty resistance to assessment. Members of departments of English are caught between complex disciplinary imperatives and the demands of a renewed corporativism, with its "data-driven decision-making," "student-centered learning," and economically-driven desire to enlist public funding and trust. Faculty have been called upon to help foster "learning environments" that, in the words of the widely influential Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, "meet the civic ends of public higher education by preparing students to lead and participate in a democratic society" (39). Within this context, assessment plays a critical but highly problematic role. On the one hand, the Kellogg Commission pays homage to the aesthetic by borrowing the language of "creativity": "Good teaching is a form of creativity that links discovery with integration and application," a "process … of creating contexts in which students, whether young or old, can grow into the fullness of their uniqueness as human beings" (40). On the other hand, creating such "contexts" turns out to be dependent upon a third term having no immediate relationship to either students or teachers, but primarily to practices of assessment: "To provide the best possible basis for our efforts," insist these university presidents and chancellors, "we need to encourage research on the learning process itself, with the goal of creating a science and a methodology to discover how we can most effectively present knowledge" (32). In linking assessment to "good teaching," then, the report smuggles in the language of creativity but uses it in ways that strip faculty of the intrinsic motivation thought central to the aesthetic. Instead of being regarded as an equal partner in a form of parallel play, or instead of being regarded as one partner in a temporary apprenticeship, within the "student-centered university," faculty are expected to serve as one unit in a twenty-four hour delivery system "committed to excellence in teaching and to meeting the legitimate needs of learners, wherever they are, whatever they need, whenever they need it" (12).

Much assessment literature simply replicates the goals, values, and problems of the Kellogg Commission, thereby helping to create the conditions for

widespread resistance to assessment. In a "learning-centered institution," writes Peggy Maki, faculty "become designers of environments and tasks that foster student discovery and the construction of meaning rather than predominantly transmitters of knowledge" (10). Her division of faculty into two groups—"designers" and "transmitters"—is, consciously or unconsciously, politically coercive; it compels faculty to choose between being regarded as "creative" teachers who care about their students, or as sub-professional people who selfishly "imitate" teaching by simply "transmitting" knowledge. Especially for literature faculty who a) teach writing and b) are trained to negotiate the complex demands of aesthetic discourse, the spitting forth of received knowledge has rarely been a viable or desirable pedagogical stance. For many of us, the "learning-centered institution" promoted by administrators and assessment officers therefore either seems beside the point or a not-so-subtle way of coercing faculty into assessment initiatives whose relevance has not always been sufficiently established. Given our historical relationship to the aesthetic, literature faculty are, for better or worse, structurally positioned to recognize that the very definition of the "student-centered university" represents a radically simplified and perhaps unnecessarily divisive notion of the pedagogical task.

"Confronting the issue of faculty motivation is certainly the most difficult task of assessment," as Maki acknowledges in *Assessing for Learning: Building a Sustainable Commitment Across the Institution*. She writes that "directing professional energy and curiosity into what and how students learn … is an essential process in a learning-centered institution" (11). Maki's notion of "directing" professional energy may, however, be part of the problem, though she comes by it honestly: one of the first principles of the Kellogg Report is that "engagement" takes strong leaders. Leadership "to create an engagement agenda is crucial," we are told. "Engagement will not develop by itself, and it will not be led by the faint of heart" (25). In contrast to these military metaphors, Csikszentmihalyi reminds us that fostering creativity is a delicate task dependent upon a curiosity that needs to be "cultivated." "Each of us," he writes,

> is born with two contradictory sets of instructions: a conservative tendency, made up of instincts for self-preservation, self-aggrandizing, and saving energy, and an expansive tendency made up of instincts for exploring, for enjoying novelty and risk—the curiosity that leads to creativity belongs to this set. We need both of these programs. But whereas the first tendency requires little encouragement or support from outside to motivate behavior, the second can wilt if not cultivated. (qtd. in Nickerson 411)

If too few opportunities for curiosity are available, he continues, or if "too many obstacles are placed in the way of risk and exploration, the motivation to engage in creative behavior is readily extinguished" (qtd. in Nickerson 411). One wonders if the ideal way to cultivate faculty interest in assessment is by enlisting a battery of "strong leaders" in an environment widely perceived as being unsafe. Surrounded by administrators and new mission statements and struggling assess-

ment officers waving the banner of "student-centered learning," faculty who question assessment efforts are too often cast as the Phantom of Student Learning Past, a creature haunting the halls of academia, wielding forty-year-old lecture notes.

David Kirp argues in *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line* that today's liberal arts professors are much "like Swiss watchmakers, offering what is widely regarded as a luxury item to a shrinking clientele," treating the "value" of our subject as "self-evident" (258-59). A more sympathetic rendering might be that professors of literature have not been the hapless and ineffectual aesthetes that they have been painted, but accidental victims of their pedagogical success. Having *intentionally* obscured the many techniques through which generation after generation of literary students has been trained to read and write about literature, partially for the sake of preserving a studied disinterestedness, professors are reluctant to discuss pedagogical strategy and have no ready protocol for demonstrating the nature of what they do. Nor is there much intrinsic incentive to develop a protocol, given that the very act of demonstration threatens to collapse that still-relevant distinction between "motivated" and "unmotivated" thought, and action. Finally, many literature faculty are, or imagine themselves to be, driven primarily by an "intrinsic" motivation that includes the desire for autonomy. Even if the assumption of autonomy is a collective self-delusion, it functions as an enabling fiction, one allowing us to experience work as creative, our teaching as the closest thing to non-alienated labor one can expect.

Coda: Can These Professors Be Saved?

When Melamid is asked if the elephants really know what they are doing when they create paintings, if they understand they are making art, he shrugs.

> We don't know what we are doing when we make art, so why should they? We think we understand, we use words like "because"—a painting is good because the artists had a certain feeling or idea, because he somehow turned that idea into an image—but really we have very little idea what we mean by that. We use words like genius, brilliant, spirit, but we don't know what these things mean, either. (49)

He is right. Despite centuries of scholarship on the relationship between individual psychology and art, for example, on "work" and "play," no one has ever been able to determine in empirical ways when a (human or non-human) animal "enjoys." Studies proliferate, including some very recent ones of trained seals whose heart rates, measured on "naïve" or self-motivated dives, are then compared to prompted ones; presumably, the faster heart rates on the former indicate a different affect, perhaps one more closely associated with pleasure (Jobsis et al. 3884). Animal right activists continue to debate whether it is cruel to have draft horses haul three times their weight in "pulls," or whether this is a naturally occurring impulse they "enjoy." Neurobiologists equate bird song with speech, and thus with learning, while musicologists treat it as a mode of natural self-expression (Kaplan and Rogers 4-6). The lines between motivated and

unmotivated behavior in elephants, whales, birds, seals, and chimpanzees, then, are at least as blurred as they are in many discussions of humans. Discussions of "creativity" in both cases are similarly structured through an emphasis upon individual psychology, the aesthetic product, and a not unproblematic opposition between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

This division between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is, of course, often more strategic than real, obscuring, as it does, the complex social and economic interdependencies through which we—humans and non-human animals— live and function. As Thailand's painting elephants demonstrate, to work in a creative economy does not mean one has entirely shed one's chains. Maine, for example, is much like Thailand, a fragile tourist economy attempting to recover from a radically decimated logging industry. Its public universities have been rebranding themselves as "student centered" for several years; the University of Southern Maine (USM) runs a fleet of buses painted with fresh-faced "life-long learners" and a new motto, "Education Your Way." As the resemblance between this ad campaign and that of an international fast food chain suggests, Maine's public university system is taking seriously the Kellogg Commission's injunction to serve students "wherever they are, whatever they need, whenever they need it" (12). One of our more notable successes in this regard is a low-residency program in creative writing, the Stonecoast MFA which, in USM's new strategic plan, is singled out as a model for the rest of us to follow; the director of the program, a nationally known poet, tells me that an MFA in creative writing was recently described on NPR as "the new MBA."

While it is hard not be a little cynical about this state of affairs, the economic success of MFA programs here and elsewhere lead me to think David Kirp overstates the case in his claim that the liberal arts have "lost much of their clientele … as career-minded undergraduates have shifted their allegiances to the practical arts" (258-59). Instead, the liberal arts, and especially those seeming to offer a skill set imagined as definitional of the "human," are being repackaged by the same folks who brought us assessment and "value-added" education. Such circumstances call for an environmentally sensitive adaptation on our part. "Whether we like it or not," insists Csikszentmihalyi, "our species has become dependent on creativity" ("Implications" 318). I have been advocating that we acknowledge the continued relevance of "creativity" in any number of discourses, including, as we have seen, environmental ones; for Thailand's elephants, the performance of creativity has become a matter of survival. While emphasizing our roles as teachers of critical analysis, as Fish suggests, is one way for literary professionals to adapt to the new culture of measurement, another may be to reclaim aesthetic discourse from the social sciences. It's worth a try. As Slavoj Žižek, echoing Lacan, writes in *In Defense of Lost Causes*, sometimes, rather than "running after 'objective' truth," it is better to hold "onto the truth about the position from which one speaks" (3).

NOTES

1   A very good bibliography on creativity research can be found in Kaufman et al.
2   Admittedly, Csikszentmihalyi does not make this point about animal art. He writes, "To be human is to be creative" (*Creativity* 318), but following the logic of his argument, it does not follow that to be creative is to be human.
3   On general versus domain-specific approaches to creativity assessment, see Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity* 23-51 and "Implications" 314-16.
4   While Fish promotes the values of disinterestedness, it is worth pointing out that any technology of the self could be regarded as a mode of *askesis*, including those allied with a particular identity or politically motivated subject position.

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ASSESSMENT IN LITERARY EDUCATION
CHARLES ALTIERI

I THINK VERY FEW OF US would not welcome more cogent attention to processes of assessment. It is obviously salutary to imagine teaching as a contract made with students to develop certain skills, powers, and bodies of knowledge. And it is apparent now that faculty members should make public on a website their specific goals for each of the classes they teach. We also have to realize that personnel committees should do even more vigilant jobs in judging how individual instructors live up to their principles and prove effective in the classroom. More important, we now have the technology to enable faculty to post representative papers (with the grader's comments but the author's names blacked out) indicating what kind of work merits each grade from them. These postings can then also serve as indices of student growth if the faculty member indicates where they come in the course of the semester.

Yet the more avid proponents of assessment are not content to raise awareness and develop more careful modes of scrutiny. They point out that these personnel committees are bound to subjective judgments, usually reduced to attending to student evaluations and, at best, one class visit. Such committees rarely examine how teachers grade or seek measures that will tell how much the faculty member has actually improved the skills that students bring to the course in the first place. And they almost never rely on objective standards that might provide a comparative measure of teaching effectiveness that can be used also to assess entire programs, especially for those who are not within the academy. Without such objective standards even the proliferation of information about faculty work might make it more rather than less difficult to make these comparisons.

We have to respond to these new demands in two ways. We have to ask theoretical questions about whether such objective standards are feasible and helpful in the various disciplinary frameworks the university cultivates. And even if we think such objective standards feasible, we have to ask practically whether they are worth the labor and expense involved. Perhaps it might be wiser to spend the money creating smaller classes so faculty can pay more attention to the student efforts that are being assessed.

At first glance it should be theoretically possible to establish objective measures for degrees of success in teaching. After all the goals of teaching are

implicit in the discipline; they need not be imposed by some foreign theoretical apparatus bound to a specific ideology. The teaching of writing should produce improvements in the students' uses of grammar, in their ability to formulate and criticize arguments, and in their facility with the language. If someone cannot show improvements in these domains it should be clear that he or she is not doing the contracted job or doing it in a much less than optimal way. Similarly if someone is teaching any kind of course that stresses reading, students should manifest improvement in their ability to summarize arguments or plots and in their ability to characterize how particular texts respond to the struggles and to the conventions that comprise relevant historical contexts.

Indeed arguments like these have been persuasive for many influential and impressive leaders in the field of composition studies.[1] But then we encounter a disturbing problem: why have so few professors who emphasize literary criticism joined their colleagues? Do they constitute a privileged remnant too lazy or too self-satisfied to acknowledge that something has to be done to develop public confidence that society's investments in higher education are worth the expenditure? Or does their involvement in the decidedly unfashionable study of literary texts make them unreasonably suspicious of anything that seeks objective knowledge and invites the heathen masses to make assessments about the high mysteries that it is their calling to defend?

I think there is another cause for their resistance to strong claims for assessment. There is first a justified suspicion that assessment and authority do not go well together. Everyone should be as transparent as possible about classroom goals and how he or she measures success. But this is a far cry from agreeing that it is even possible for public bodies removed from the classroom to develop measures that would have to apply uniformly to quite diverse cases. And these measures would impose another level on the educational process. It would be difficult not to teach to the measures once they are in place—we have learned this much from "No Child Left Behind." We would enter a situation where we have to trust in some abstract indicator of teaching success that is likely to be insensitive to what makes us commit to teaching in the first place. And the promise of comparing classes or institutions under one rubric is likely also to collapse all sorts of differences that make institutions and individual teachers attractive in the first place.

These suspicions are considerably deepened when we turn to theoretical frameworks that have traditionally been central to the teaching of literary texts, and have therefore shaped many of the expectations for professors of what is involved in the successful teaching of these materials. We will see that if we are to teach literary texts as aesthetic objects (at least in part) we also have to emphasize writing about these texts. And this kind of writing cannot dwell on these texts as objects of knowledge, or even objects that solicit knowledge about the culture. Rather such writing is best conceived as showing how one can participate imaginatively and affectively in the experiences that are promising to modify and reward our sensibilities as they strive to identify provisionally with particular struggles and particular modes of attention. These

provisional identifications typically do not offer themselves as vehicles by which we develop knowledge and transform fleeting experience into stable generalizations. Instead they ask to be evaluated simply by how the writing articulates the student's capacities for responsiveness to particular qualities in the work.

There are many elements of this perspective on literary education that I will have to unpack and clarify. So I will offer an account borrowed largely from Hegel about what is involved in getting students to respond to the aesthetic dimension of what we teach.[2] Hegel will also indicate why the project of cultivating powers of aesthetic judgment can serve as a paradigm case for difficulties that arise on various levels in any educational enterprise in which writing is an important component intended to demonstrate how the students develop their own capacities for various kinds of judgments. Being clear about the aesthetic also entails recognizing the difficulty of postulating determinate practical outcomes when one wants not only to communicate a body of material but also to model a standard for how to modify our sense of value through that reading. For many of us, teaching literature begins with the effort to communicate how that discipline differs—for better and for worse—from the kinds of disciplines devoted to communicating directly usable knowledge. In teaching aesthetic values we have to emphasize considering states and values like attentiveness, intensity, force, and complexity that are extremely difficult for anyone to measure. But, I hasten to add, the difficulty is precisely the reason why this kind of teaching has to be encouraged, because it aims to articulate values that affect mainstream life while being inaccessible to its dominant practical languages.

Now I face the challenge of being persuasive about how the goals for teaching literary appreciation can be clear and at the same time indicate how difficult it would be to translate that clarity into the practical testing of proposed outcomes. Invoking Hegelian abstraction will seem to many a strange means of confronting that challenge. But I think his abstractness makes it possible to present the case in its most elemental form. For the abstraction is not so much an evasion of concrete particulars as an attempt to capture conceptually what is involved in valuing those particulars.

My specific focus will be elaborating three "common ideas of art"[3] that Hegel puts at the center of his "Introduction" to his *Aesthetics*:

1. The work of art is no natural product; it is brought about by human activity;
2. It is essentially made for man's apprehension, and in particular is drawn more or less from the sensuous field for apprehension by the senses;
3. It has an end and aim in itself. (25)

These propositions, especially the third, are not uncontroversial. But minimally they clearly define the beliefs involved if we are both to distinguish art from other modes of activity and to insist on the degree to which teaching literature is training in responsiveness to art objects.

Let me not be so happy in my abstraction that I dismiss examples. Examples measure the applicability of abstractions while abstractions articulate what might be possible to exemplify. For brevity's sake I am going to emphasize two one-line speeches by Cleopatra in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, one from the beginning of the play and one from 3.13 just after a Roman envoy offers promises to Cleopatra. The first passage comprises Cleopatra's first words in the play, "if it be love indeed, tell me how much" (1.1.14); the second is her response to Antony's shame and jealousy as he abuses Caesar's messenger, "Not know me yet" (3.13.160). Both passages invite historical speculation about how Cleopatra dealt with imperial power. But I suspect that most university teachers of this play still focus their attention on how Shakespeare interprets and embodies the psychology of Cleopatra's dealing with imperial power—hence the importance of Hegel's first and second claims.

Notice all that Cleopatra's first speech accomplishes. This speech occurs just after the play has given the typical Roman soldier's view that their commander has become "a strumpet's fool" (1.1.13) as he devotes himself to becoming "the bellows and the fan / to cool a gypsy's lust" (1.1.9-10). But these words are the not the expression of a strumpet, and not even an exercise in lust. Cleopatra defines herself primarily as someone who mocks calculation, demands infinite attention, and possesses a complex mind capable of only half-believing in the games that the monarchs are playing about love. Speaking quasi-seriously in this way just is an intense form of erotic love, primarily because only that kind of love can occupy the space between the practical and something like an absolute domain where people contour themselves to intricate exchanges involving different degrees of belief and possibility. And the love is not merely narcissistic. Cleopatra taunts Antony in a way that reflects her understanding of his proclivity to shame while obdurately refusing to let him give himself over to something that in her eyes is not his best self. She uses the language of quantity to remind him that this is not the language that could even approximate what they share. This sharing takes performing the love, not trying to measure it.

Much more can be said about Cleopatra's opening speech. But we have seen enough to appreciate how Hegel's first claim is carefully worded to produce several important corollaries. Art is not a natural product because there is no rule of nature that explains its production or its use. There is no discovering in nature a Cleopatra or prototype for her, and there is no deciding from nature what the dramatic reality of Cleopatra has to be. The Roman soldiers try that route. We do not recognize Cleopatra as a natural creature but as in every word and image Shakespeare's product. It is Shakespeare who creates the possibility of a character whom we have to take as providing a model for nature. And that possibility is not quite a matter of a single creative idea. Rather it stems from a continuous sense of invention that establishes endless surprises as the character in effect learns its own possibilities for establishing an identity. The authorial activity becomes a fundamental internal feature of what we take to be the power of the characters to invent themselves.

As Hegel develops this first claim he recognizes how dependent the aesthetic domain is on what can be known objectively (and assessed as knowledge). There is a purely technical side of making that should become an object of study: "Skill in technique is not developed by any inspiration, but only by reflection, industry, and practice." Without such skill one cannot be expected to "master" intractable "external material" (27). And where there is technique there are particular histories of its development and its distinct uses that are nourished by comparison with other skills and genres. But this acknowledgment also makes manifest the significance of what cannot be quite grasped as knowledge but has to be experienced as authorial intelligence purposefully putting qualities to work for quite specific imaginative purposes.

This sense of pervasive intelligence need not accompany the awareness that the particular is a product of human labor rather than of nature. In fact there is here a contrast quite useful for defining the distinctive role of art in most societies. Many products tend to take on something like a second nature—in the sense that we treat them primarily as aspects of a cultural landscape that we know how to use. We simply accept them as already categorized. For example, I think it is a crucial fact that most of us do not worry about how light bulbs are invented or produced. They are objects ready to hand. We concentrate on what they are useful for rather than on the manner of their invention or substance. Art works have a very different status. Cleopatra is not a determinate object in our world with clear uses. Rather she becomes a living particular capable of changing and growing to the extent that we can gain further appreciation of what the making process establishes as her distinctive traits. Rather than assume we know what to do with her, we have to attend to what our attention might reveal about her and about our capacities to respond adequately to the particular emotions she presents.

In choosing Cleopatra as my example I probably cheat a little by making it easier to illustrate what Hegel means in his second claim about the sensuousness of art. She is nothing if not sensuous. Even her claim on Antony to tell her how much he loves her is ultimately a bid to have all her senses active and self-aware. But the sharpness of the example provides a timely contrast to a social and critical order obsessed with acts of interpretation eager to transform every sensuous detail into an allegorical meaning. With Cleopatra Shakespeare established an imaginative object insistent on its sensuous being, and insistent too then on the importance of foregrounding the particularity of the work. Shakespeare seems less interested in what Cleopatra might stand for than in how her ways of standing elicit telling reactions from the other characters and so contribute to establishing a dense singular world.

The crucial point of assessing assessment is how Cleopatra's sensuousness manifests the importance of distinguishing sharply the particular interrelations that a work offers from anything for which we can claim knowledge. To claim knowledge one has to show how the particular is an instance of a class or category with determinable relations to other elements within the category. But here all of Shakespeare's skills seem devoted to showing how the imagination through the particular can take up residence in the sensuous. It is less impor-

tant to formulate ideas about Cleopatra than for students to give evidence that they can feel their way into her distinctive ways of processing experience. Indeed that is why there is an immense gulf between formulating why she says "if it be love indeed, tell me how much," and identifying with this character who can at once make her lover ashamed and stimulated so that she can take her pleasure in her own strategies.

Making the case for these values embedded in particularity requires Hegel to distinguish between levels of sensuousness. On one level the activity of making brings out signifying capacities in the sensuous material. Music orders sound and elaborates rhythms; literature awakens us to the capacities of language to become articulate—both semantically and sonically. But if we deal only with this level of sensuality we risk connoisseurship on the one hand and the cult of feeling or sheer reader response on the other. We can collapse the work into the expertise visible within the medium or we can collapse all sensuousness into a focus on how the work makes us feel. However, this is insufficient to what the human activity within the work can produce. I risk Hegelian language to demonstrate this because his statement is so powerful in defining a more capacious version of the sensuousness that calls upon our full imaginative energies:

> Of course science can start from the sensuous in its individuality and possess an idea of how this individual thing comes to be there in its individual color, shape, size, etc. Yet in this case the isolated sensuous thing has no further bearing on the spirit, inasmuch as intelligence goes straight for the universal, the law, the thought and concept of the object.… On the contrary the sensuousness in the work of art is itself something ideal.… These sensuous shapes and sounds appear in art not merely for the sake of themselves … but with the aim, in this shape, of affording satisfaction to the higher spiritual interests, since they have the power to call forth from all the depths of consciousness a sound and echo in the spirit. (37-39)

Contemporary policymakers in education do not have much truck with talk of "spirit." But Hegel is careful to define spirit as self-consciousness seeking to find expression for all its potential. In other words, Hegel is first of all an educational theorist attempting to define the many distinctive ways we bring self-consciousness to what we construct as our places in the actual world. Basic modes of self-consciousness each require different kinds of assessment if they are not to collapse into something ultimately alien. Art asks that self-consciousness be directed to how the imagination can provide individual transformations of experience that take particular sensuous form but cannot be exhausted by straightforward description of that mode of appearance. As Richard Wollheim demonstrated, art is not just a viewing of the sensuous but a *seeing in* to that sensuousness so that it cultivates self-consciousness of powers that we realize only through this mode of apprehension (45-49). Try imagining a range of experiences of joy without music or rapt attention without visual art.

Hegel's third claim is the one most dependent on, and illustrative of, his idea of spirit because it depends on the possibility that self-consciousness can grow and intensify its focus by having itself as the object which it must try to understand. Most of us now are as suspicious of claims that anything can be an end in itself as we are claims about spirit—and for good reason since the two beliefs are very closely connected. But I think there are many experiences that we cannot sufficiently honor without a distinction between treating situations as having ends beyond themselves and as having at least important dimensions in which the experience is an end in itself to be elaborated simply for the sake of what it affords self-consciousness. (This is easier if we admit that experiences can have different dimensions inviting different modes of apprehension and assessment.)

The point is sufficiently important that I will indulge in some amateur philosophizing before returning to Shakespeare and the topic of assessment. We can treat any purposive action as having its end either outside itself or in itself. Attributing an end outside itself consigns the object of the action to the status of an instrument or tool that facilitates the accomplishment of some desire. But the object itself then ceases to interest—compare eating to fuel up with eating to relish some distinctive qualities in the food. (Or compare what one can call meat fishing with perfecting one's fly-casting, even at the risk of going hungry.) Notice that when we choose to treat some process as an end in itself rather than as an instrument, we grant it the power to establish values, and we orient ourselves to acknowledging in practice the difference this makes. We can be happy with our fly-casting even if we catch no fish and remain hungry. We might contest someone's assertions about ends in themselves but we rarely feel free simply to override what they refer to for our own purposes. And we therefore give some concreteness to the notion of spirit as the capacity to dwell within conditions where we seek to intensify consciousness of who the self becomes as it renounces its habitual sense of treating the world in instrumental terms.

Shakespeare probably wanted to intensify just this contrast between kinds of ends in the second speech of Cleopatra that I have chosen as an example. So please ask yourselves what is accomplished by Cleopatra saying "Not know me yet?" as the climax to her frustration and disappointment with Antony's letting his shame at the military defeat turn into jealousy and self-pity. I think here she has to be fully self-conscious of the roles she has chosen to play because she may have only her self-consciousness to dignify what is likely to happen with Caesar's victory. So she relies on the internal relationships that Shakespeare composes for his drama to find a self adequate to this moment. She experiences a close connection between trying to establish a self not governed by prudential interests and the capacity of looking back on what she has been in the play to establish powers to maintain what can resist the prudential. Notice that her one line statement itself builds on a series of one line refusals in the scene that are all directed against Antony's self-pitying theatrics. (Her richest moment may be her statement "Have you done yet" [3.13.155] that magisterially dismisses Antony's letting himself indulge in the shame he feels

because of the contrast between what he "was" and what he now "is.")

Cleopatra's "Not know me yet" also elaborates a much more comprehensive sense that the play is the thing wherein to establish a sense of character that one can bring to the actual world. What would it mean for Antony to know her at this moment? And by implication what would it mean for the audience to know her? Indeed what can we assess of that knowing—what outcome can we project and test? Probably our only answer can be that the knowledge has to reside in the quality of our reading and participating imaginatively in what she composes as her character. Antony can not know her at this moment because he is so full of himself. He is doomed to be a bad reader. But he can show by contrast what good reading will probably involve. And that reading will not produce an object of knowledge. Cleopatra could not even produce that. Rather good reading will provide evidence that one has provisionally taken Cleopatra's part so that one can give full imaginative credit to her ability to manipulate political situations and, more importantly, to be faithful in her fashion to the image both lovers have created of a kind of transcendent dignity of passion.

The best readings of *Antony and Cleopatra* will not entirely submit to her capacity to control theatrical space. Rather they will know her also in a way that she resists knowing herself. They will know how tempted she is to find a way to reconcile with Caesar and how being a strumpet perhaps haunts her fears that success as an Egyptian queen may not qualify her to deal with those instrumentalist Romans who have built greater power. And they will know how desperate she is that Antony find his way back to the fragile but powerful myth of heroic lovers that binds them in what may be little more than illusion. In other words, these best readings devote themselves most fully to the various intense and intensive patterns of meaningfulness that the text establishes for and within its sensuous action. Assessing these readings then may well require an awareness of how students can ultimately develop a sense of texts as ends in themselves—not as escapes from the world but as the fullest possible means of honoring the intelligence the work brings to the world.

Hegel makes a pretty fair spokesperson for the kind of reading that answers Cleopatra's call for a distinctive kind of knowledge:

> Against this [the idea that "the work of art would have validity only as a useful tool"] we must maintain that art's vocation is to unveil the truth in the form of sensuous artistic configuration to set forth the reconciled opposites … and so to have its end and aim in itself, in this very setting forth and unveiling. For other ends, like instruction, purification, bettering, financial gain, struggling for fame and honor, have nothing to do with the work of art as such, and do not determine its nature. (55)

So long as we believe that it makes sense to confer a state of distinction on what cultures honor as works of art we will have to be leery of all claims about assessment that try to hold a variety of pedagogical practices to single

standards. And in the case of education for appreciation this problem is exacerbated by the fact that any model of assessment responsive to the ideals informing the teaching will require an inordinate expense of money and time.

First, assessing such teaching for aesthetic ends requires assessing the quality of classroom conversation. Then it entails finding objective means of evaluating the kind of student writing that tries to be articulate about what is involved in engaging texts as aesthetic experiences. I do not think that can be done under the same rubrics we use to assess student writing intended to convey information because in writing on aesthetic objects every turn in the argument involves a display of sensibility that affects our sense of what the student can and cannot respond to. And the qualities of the thinking displayed cannot be presumed to be the same qualities we value for the economical and clear presentation of discursive arguments. If students learn to be fully responsive to such plays they will want their response also to be at least in part something that they can feel reflects their own individual capacities to respond with affective intelligence to what moves them about their worlds. Even when papers on aesthetic objects take the form of clear arguments, the success of the argument depends to a large extent on an assessor's distinctive grasp of the object addressed. The more the emphasis at every level on the importance of particularity, the less useful any general rubric for assessment—whether it be of the student or of the level of work being accomplished by the class. The abstractness of the instrument runs the risk of swallowing the distinctiveness of the performance.

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I hope I have demonstrated that there are good reasons professors concentrating on the teaching of literature resist efforts to develop models of assessment that can be applied to their classes across the board. The risk involved is substantial because it encourages thinking that objective measures of any kind can be easily adapted for this fluid and often idiosyncratic process. It is difficult even to imagine any objective language of assessment that would not distort and dishonor the commitments to particularity that faculty want to encourage and develop—both in regard to texts and in regard to the students' own senses of the qualities of discrimination they can bring to bear in their reading and in their writing. The effort to apply objective modes of assessment would influence how teachers being assessed taught their subject even though it does not emerge from study of that subject. So we would in effect be changing the discipline in ways that few would explicitly defend, and we would be reducing the chances of students coming to experience what full cultural literacy can be.

Most important, if we ever found an adequate way to assess the achievement involved in writing about aesthetic experience, I cannot imagine that it would be very different in the long run from how any decent instructor evaluates writing by responding simply to criteria like attentiveness and imaginativeness. And it would take examining just what these instructors examine, so it would involve an immense effort with little promise of significant rewards. It

would be far better to put what money we have into providing smaller classes so that instructors can assign more in-depth writing and develop more finely tuned assessments of how individuals are doing in the course.

NOTES

1   For powerful statements on possibilities of assessment see Wells, "Assessment without Angst" and Graff, "Assessment Changes Everything."

2   I will use the concept of "appreciation" as short hand for "learning that focuses on aesthetic experience" even though technically appreciation is a specific mode of aesthetic experience where we dwell in the possibilities of judgment rather than make practical determinations.

3   I take my sense of abstraction as form from Hegel's notion of how philosophy brings out an internal necessity in relation to the phenomena under discussion. A successful concept is not content to provide descriptive terminology. Rather it develops an internal necessity so that the concept actually displays what we learn through it to be the necessary features of the concept. When we develop a concept elaborating relations among standard concerns about what makes art, we should be able to see that the claims so structure the field that they display their own fit and scope.

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Politics, Institutions, and Disciplinary Goals

ASSESSMENT, LITERARY STUDY, AND DISCIPLINARY FUTURES

LAURA J. ROSENTHAL

MOST FACULTY MEMBERS IN LITERATURE departments had little familiarity with outcomes assessment until recently, and it seems to be coming at a bad time. It is no secret that the university is facing an unprecedented crisis, and that within the university the humanities are in a particular crisis, and that within the humanities the discipline of English literature has been in crises of various forms for many years (although perhaps unmatched by the current situation). A report from the Modern Language Association (MLA), for example, calculated a 27.5% drop in tenured or tenure-track jobs in English and a 26.7% drop for foreign languages for 2009-10 (MLA,"Midyear Report"1); research recently conducted by an MLA task force showed that approximately 66.6% of instructors in English and 57.1% in foreign languages are not tenured or on tenure-track lines (MLA and ADE 27). The percentage of students majoring in English has declined. Unlike in many other fields, the number of doctorates earned has diminished (Lamont 59), and even given this drop, many critics (including many from within the discipline) think we are still overproducing. In addition to financial crises and apparent decreased appeal to students, literary study has also experienced several decades of internal conflict that has both energized and drained the field. Some of this conflict has attracted attention beyond the university walls, suggesting that the general public has a particular stake in what we do. Much of this publicity, however, has not been positive. As Louis Menand asks regarding the public reception of ideas produced in literature departments, "How is it that humanists get painted into a cultural corner so that everything that a social or natural scientist says that is counterintuitive receives public genuflection, but literature professors are expected to do nothing but reaffirm common sense?" (10-11). And now, in addition to enduring public suspicion, fighting with crusty old colleagues or upstart young ones over curriculum, and competing for the students' attention with the wireless internet that your university, which cannot afford to offer decent-sized classes, has nevertheless inflicted on your classroom, you need to produce reams of pointless information demonstrating that students are learning something. Not only are you too busy to produce this pointless information, but there is something vaguely suspicious about the entire project.

For most faculty members in literary studies, outcomes assessment only became visible when accrediting agencies, pressured by the federal government during the Bush administration, began to require evidence of this practice on campuses. This new development approximately followed No Child Left Behind (NCLB), sharing historical if not ideological ties to this much-criticized change in K-12 education. Few confronting outcomes assessment for the first time fail to connect the broad defunding of higher education and the particular crises faced by the humanities with the apparently increasing suspicion of those employed to teach in those fields.

I will return to these crises and conflicts throughout the essay. But while it is certainly true that some governmental advocates of assessment (I am thinking here in particular of the Spellings Commission report [United States Dept. of Education]) seem to have a fundamental distrust of higher education and a deaf ear for the subtle work of the humanities, and that the call to assess adds one more time-consuming project to increasingly demanding positions with less and less support, I am going to make the counterintuitive suggestion in this essay that, whatever its origin, engagement with assessment can actually address the crisis within the discipline and beyond it in a productive way. Assessment, while coming to us as part of the problem, might be able to become part of the solution. In this essay, I will explore this possibility first by elaborating on "the problem" as both the ways in which literary study has suffered as a result of the general restructuring of the university *and* the internal conflicts that have made advocating for our discipline a particular challenge. I will then suggest how assessment projects can help us both understand and advocate for the value of literary studies. What I am addressing here is almost a "secondary" effect of assessment, its main purpose being the investigation of how well students are learning. Certainly the improvement of student learning remains the most important goal of any assessment project. The secondary effects, however, have perhaps attracted more attention in disciplinary venues in literary studies, and for this reason they deserve attention as well. While many critics have objected that outcomes assessment will necessarily miss the point of the discipline, I would like to suggest that it might help us articulate more clearly and more forcefully our "deliverables"—that is, what we offer students, the university, and the public.

Before going forward, let me clarify what I mean by "assessment." Roughly speaking, outcomes assessment as practiced on most campuses has two components: 1) fulfilling the demands of accountability; and 2) research into strategies for improving student learning. As Peter Ewell has pointed out, these separate components have separate goals and separate histories: long before accrediting agencies started asking for evidence of assessment, scholars had been engaged in a range of projects to figure out how well students were learning, from studies on an individual classroom to the development of learning measurement instruments used across the country. I want to recognize how important this distinction continues to be. Nevertheless, while I am not specifically addressing issues of accountability in this essay,[1] I am using "assessment" throughout to address not just the practice of attempting to

improve student learning but the way those practices fit into institutions. Mostly in this essay, I am interested in the ways in which the practice of outcomes assessment might contribute productively to ongoing debates about the future of literary studies.[2]

The Crises

The larger crisis of the university has by now become familiar to many people both inside and outside of the academy. Because it provides the context for my argument about assessment and also for the reception of assessment by faculty members as part of new demands for accountability, it is worth briefly mentioning and distinguishing some of its different dimensions. Certainly higher education has been hit in profound ways by the recent recession, resulting most dramatically in rising tuition costs, faculty and staff furloughs, cuts to important programs, hiring freezes, and larger class sizes. Considerable research suggests, however, that the current crisis has magnified a set of problems that have been building for a long time and that have resulted from a change in thinking about higher education as a public good that demands public support, to thinking about higher education along the lines of a business, often referred to as the "corporate" model. In *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line*, David Kirp provides an excellent survey of the various ways in which business models based on profit and competition for prestige have reshaped higher education. Many institutions, for example, have attempted to repackage themselves in ways that either de-emphasize academics or seek a kind of "niche" marketing to broaden their application pool and/or attract more students. Further, departments have thrown themselves into "star treks with at best mixed results," in which a series of high-profile hires are made in the hope of raising departmental rankings (Kirp 68). Many such attempts simply fail, Kirp points out, as these carefully constructed departments can quickly disintegrate when a few faculty stars accept other offers. But there is a cost even when they succeed. In New York University's star-powered philosophy department, for example, the institution "sloughs off a great deal of its teaching onto part-timers," as light teaching obligations are used to attract high-profile faculty (69). Such ventures, then, contribute to the crises in higher education by creating a structure often sustained by underpaid adjuncts with limited job security.

While Kirp looks at how universities have contributed to our current predicament by competing for rankings and prestige, Christopher Newfield offers a wide-ranging analysis of the erosion of the public commitment to higher education and its devastating effects on democracy. In *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class,* Newfield explores not just the systematic defunding of public universities, but also the structural transformations within public universities on the model of private enterprise. Newfield's larger point is to suggest how crucial public research universities have been to the expansion of the middle class, and how resistance to the multiculturalism that public universities have tended to foster (by providing opportunities for upward mobility to previously underrepresented kinds of students) has influenced their defunding. Without these institutions and broad access to

them, we lose a significant pathway to democratic participation across racial and ethnic groups. Further, Newfield shows that the corporate model favors the sciences for their potential to form partnerships with business, but that the humanities essentially subsidize these ventures by providing significant classroom education at a considerably lower cost. The "overhead" regularly charged to grants won by scientists rarely covers their price (195-207). Prestigious grants, then, while seeming to bring in money, in general need to be subsidized. According to Newfield, institutions often turn to tuition income generated by the other side of campus in order to compensate for these expensive grants. The result of all of these policies has been a continued diminishing in the quality of public higher education.

Two other studies worth mentioning in this context elaborate in different ways on the results of the situations that Kirp and Newfield describe by exploring the economics of instruction and faculty careers, particularly in the humanities. Frank Donoghue's *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* and Marc Bousquet's *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* in different ways show how this same corporatization of the university has severely undermined faculty careers in the humanities, both linking this development to the broader casualization of labor since the Reagan era. Donoghue focuses specifically on the humanities, showing that the attack on humanistic learning has been going strong in the United States since "the emergence of America as an industrial power": "Unregulated monopolistic capitalists such as [Andrew] Carnegie and [Richard Teller] Crane simply thought of the humanities as, literally, worthless" (xiii-xiv). For Donoghue, the danger to the humanities is posed less by the culture wars than by figures like Robert Zemsky, "whose whole body of work relentlessly poses the following question: Businesses and markets have always proven successful, so why don't universities operate more like businesses?" (xv). Marc Bousquet explores one particular result of this business model: an explosion of reliance on adjunct faculty who teach courses without receiving benefits, a living wage, or job security. By placing high priority on producing student credit hours at the lowest possible cost, institutions of higher education in his view have become highly exploitative employers. While Donoghue sees no way out of this downward slide that will end with the elimination of tenure and thus the university as we know it, Bousquet wants to call attention to the current situation as a crisis in labor relations that can be addressed through strategic action.

The restructuring of higher education documented by Kirp, Newfield, and Bousquet has affected every discipline. Perhaps, though, their arguments have a particular urgency for literary studies, which has a difficult time defending itself from an economic perspective and has also been the object of attack for its internal conflicts and reputed failures. (Surely it is no coincidence that Newfield, Bousquet, and Donoghue all find their disciplinary homes in English departments.) Literary studies as a discipline has for several years been facing challenges on two fronts: the economic woes that seem to place it

at a disadvantage, and concern over internal conflicts about the purpose of the discipline. So while some critics see literary studies as economically unproductive or would reduce the field to instrumentality (English majors write good memos!), others have attacked the discipline for failing to defend its traditional values. For many years conservative critics have been arguing that literary studies has abandoned its mission by embracing theory at the expense of great books, and multiculturalism at the expense of aesthetic values. It is no surprise, then, to find these arguments converging. In a recent article in *The American Scholar*, William M. Chace suggests that the decline of English departments originates in its own disciplinary practices:

> At the root is the failure of departments of English across the
> country to champion, with passion, the books they teach and to
> make a strong case to undergraduates that the knowledge of
> those books and the tradition in which they exist is a human good
> in and of itself. What departments have done instead is dismem-
> ber the curriculum, drift away from the notion that historical
> chronology is important, and substitute for the books themselves
> a scattered array of secondary considerations (identity studies,
> abstruse theory, sexuality, film and popular culture).

Chace acknowledges other factors, such as an increasing emphasis on "practical" subjects and a great proportion of students attending public institutions, which have tended to offer less support to the liberal arts than private schools. Nevertheless, he sees the abandonment of literature as the primary source of the problem: "English has become less and less coherent as a discipline and, worse, has come near exhaustion as a scholarly pursuit. English departments have not responded energetically and resourcefully to the situation surrounding them."

It would be easy to dismiss Chace's essay as one more attack in a long line of them. After all, we have heard many of these objections before from Harold Bloom, Camille Paglia, and others. Donoghue argues that the culture wars are essentially over, and that worrying about whether your course includes Shakespeare or Aphra Behn amounts to rearranging the proverbial deck chairs on the Titanic. Certainly this issue cannot be settled here; I will only note before moving on that turning back is probably not an option anyway. Given all the research and exploration of writers and cultural expressions outside the "traditional" canon in the last decades, re-embracing one particular group of authors would feel intellectually dishonest even if one were convinced by the potential strategic advantages of doing so. Restoration drama, to take one example, no longer makes any sense without Aphra Behn, not simply because she is a woman but because she was the second most produced playwright in her time, greatly appreciated in her day, and a skilled craftsman with stunning insight into the complexity of her society and the human beings who negotiated it. Yet, just because returning to a mythical past of literary coherence would prove quixotic does not mean that we shouldn't think about

whether it might be possible to improve the external standing of the discipline by looking inward.

While Chace raises an old complaint, it holds new meaning in our changing circumstances. Gerald Graff has argued persuasively that the most typical institutional response to departmental disagreements over theory and the canon has been to expand the curriculum by adding new courses, new fields, and new kinds of practitioners to departments (*Professing Literature*). This observation is fully supported by both the MLA bibliography and (in my experience at least) institutional practice. For Graff this strategy, while accommodating different points of view, has generated its own problems: students encounter vastly different ideas and approaches in different classes within the same major, and most cannot sort through these contradictions on their own. In addition to these pedagogical challenges, we can also see, as critics often observe, that this model of accommodation depends on a proliferation of positions, scholarly journals, conferences, etc. Departments have not, in Graff's view, tended to address the intellectual and pedagogical problems of this model; further, we seem to be facing a situation in which this kind of expansion poses particular challenges.

While I do not, then, accept Chace's suggestions that an outdated curriculum would attract more students, it is nevertheless worth considering the possibility that critical self-reflection could be productive and that there is more to be done in the way of communicating the value of the discipline in ways that do not assume that this value is self-evident. In arguing this, I do not mean to imply that none of this is taking place already. The recent MLA/Teagle report represents one such effort, in which a team of scholars made a case for a particular set of disciplinary goals ("Report to the Teagle Foundation"). In fact, there been many attempts from many different angles to analyze our current challenges and point the discipline in particular directions. What has attracted less attention, however, is what actually happens in the many classrooms in which literary studies take place. Chace complains, for example, that the Harvard undergraduate curriculum has replaced its survey with a course of study based on "affinity groups" ("Arrivals," "Poets," "Diffusions," and "Shakespeares"). For Chace, the weakness of this course of study is evident from the titles. Those titles alone, however, actually give us very little information. Do we know from them what or how well students are learning? Did we know what or how well they were learning in the surveys they replaced? Perhaps more to the point, what are they learning at the University of Massachusetts? At Massachusetts community colleges? Answering those important questions would require a different kind of research than a glimpse at the undergraduate catalogue. Both attacks and defenses of literature programs tend to be launched more often on the basis of what is (or should be) taught rather than what assessment helps us see as the more pressing issue of how students are learning and what kind of thinkers they can become.

Outcomes assessment has been greeted with considerable suspicion in part, I believe, because it appears to be consistent with the corporate model,

thus alienating both traditionalists and non-traditionalists alike. It seems to be asking us to bloodlessly quantify skills that a literature major will acquire and an employer might be looking for. It seems, at first glance, to ask us to reduce ineffability to instrumentality. A conscientious engagement with the questions that outcomes assessment can raise, however, holds the potential to move us in some productive directions. Specifically, thinking deeply and systematically about what we want students to learn from literary study, about how we hope they develop as they move through our programs, about what kinds of capacities we would like them to develop, and about what kinds of inquiry they should become capable of pursuing will offer more clarity about the future of the discipline than these relatively unproductive debates over the canon. Shifting our focus in this way will also, I believe, offer the potential to help us advocate for our significance as a discipline and more clearly come to terms with the nature of our challenges. Assessment, however, has met with particular resistance in literary studies for reasons that make sense in the current context but that could ultimately prove counter-productive. Before elaborating on how assessment could help, then, I would like to explore the specific disciplinary panic that it tends to generate.

Deliverables

The crisis specific to literary study has many components, but at least part of it has to do with questions from within and suspicions from without regarding disciplinary purpose. To demonstrate this, it might be useful to turn to one of its less volatile aspects. Once I served on a multidisciplinary committee to distribute grant awards, and I remember feeling that other members were under-appreciating some very strong proposals from English. When questioned about this, my colleagues objected to the obscurity of the English proposals, especially in regard to the crucial category of "impact." Thus while I could understand the proposal from the evolutionary biologist on the genetic traits of albino cave worms—that is, I could tell you that the project involved albino cave worms and even, actually, why they mattered—the other committee members had found it difficult to figure out even the topic of the English proposals and had no idea how funding them would produce, as they put it, "deliverables."

Michèle Lamont's recent book *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment*, an engaging study of interdisciplinary grant proposal evaluation panels, suggests that this experience was not idiosyncratic: "English, the only field [of the five she studied] to show a decline in PhDs granted between 1995 and 2005, is also the discipline where the very concept of academic excellence has come under the greatest attack" (59). Proposals from English have become less competitive in national grant competitions perhaps because, she speculates, of an internal relativism that has led to a "crisis of legitimation." Similarly noting the declining status of English based on the diminishing number of undergraduate English majors, Louis Menand in 2005 encouraged the colonization of other disciplinary objects as one positive step that literary scholars could take to enliven their work and expand their audi-

ence (14). This advice seems to have been followed: Lamont suggests that English professors have attempted to address their "demographic decline" through cross-disciplinary efforts. This cross-disciplinarity, however, has in her view had the unintended effect of diminishing English's competitiveness by producing work that scholars in other disciplines see as subpar attempts at history or anthropology or sociology. Proposals from literature scholars, in other words, fail to express the unique qualities of the disciplinary approach to the material, which no longer remains defined by a particular set of texts.

I believe that this disciplinary instability—what Lamont calls the "crisis of legitimation"—accounts in part for the way those in the field often find the call to assessment particularly vexing. If indeed the discipline has, as Graff suggests, expanded rather than sorted or confronted, then assessment poses a particular kind of challenge. The English department, of course, is not the only place on campus where one meets with distress over assessment; it seems, however, that assessment projects meet particular roadblocks in literary studies. When he was MLA's president, Graff cast his own advocacy of assessment as a significant departure from mainstream thought in the profession: "In the hundreds of faculty meetings in my forty-plus years of teaching, I never heard anyone ask how our department or college was doing at educating all its students" ("President's Column" 3). Not only does Graff characterize assessment as a radical break from customary departmental practices in English departments, but he devotes much of the column to countering a paper on assessment given by Michael Bennett, in which Bennett encouraged faculty to "resist" assessment because it is a "dodge from the real problems of the American educational system" (qtd. in Graff, "Assessment").

A version of Graff's essay that appeared in *Inside Higher Education* generated considerable debate, much of it attacking his support of assessment (although some praising it) ("Assessment Changes Everything"). Of particular interest in this context is a vigorous disagreement by Laurie Fendrich, who has elsewhere criticized assessment ("A Pedagogical Straitjacket"; "You Will Be Held Accountable"). Writing from outside the discipline of literary studies, Fendrich characterizes Graff's interest in assessment as a form of reparation:

> Perhaps Professor Graff suffers from guilt over what's happened to his own field—English—during the past several decades. After all, he's witnessed the destruction of the study of the putative subject at hand in favor of theory. That's a sad thing, and to the extent that he participated in it, he ought to feel guilty. For the rest of us who didn't destroy our subjects, however, Outcomes Assessment is a wretched thing. ("Gerald Graff's Essay")

Fendrich understands Graff's embrace of assessment as a strategy for disciplinary repair made necessary by his contributions to its destruction.

From very different angles, however, both Fendrich's comments and Graff's essays support the suggestion that assessment has met with, and perhaps by now has a reputation of meeting with, particular resistance in literary studies.

My own attempt to introduce assessment as a topic for discussion in the MLA's Delegate Assembly, though ultimately successful, was initially met with some suspicion. Both at the meeting and before it, some colleagues expressed the concern that to hold an MLA-sanctioned discussion on this topic would legitimize it, something the professional organization should be careful not to do. In other disciplines, by contrast, professional organizations themselves have for many years offered tools to help faculty with assessment (as actually, has the MLA, although perhaps less visibly than other organizations). The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) has gathered together a considerable digital archive of advice and policy statements put out by various professional organizations representing many different disciplines.[3] The American Chemical Society's Division of Chemical Education, for example, offers exams, laboratory assessment, and study materials. The Society's webpage encourages instructors to return results from those exams so that the Society can compile statistical data. The National Communication Association offers its member a well-developed page of discipline-specific assessment resources, including criteria for assessment, guidelines for department assessment, assessment techniques and methods, and a conceptual framework for assessment. In addition to providing online resources for assessment, the American Political Science Association has recently published a book entitled *Assessment in Political Science* (Deardoff et al.). The American Historical Association does not post assessment material, but it lists criteria for standards in the field. The American Philosophical Association provides a careful explanation of assessment and examples of how to integrate outcome goals into courses. This document also addresses some of the concerns that members might have with assessment. The section for English lists two recourses: a link to position statements on digital literacy and assessment on the Conference on College Composition and Communication website and a link to a discussion of electronic portfolios sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English. The editors of this web resource list nothing from the MLA.

Surely there are other disciplinary societies that do not appear on the NILOA website and, as the essay by Feal, Laurence, and Olsen in this volume demonstrates, the Association of Departments of English (ADE) and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)—both part of the MLA—have in fact been exploring assessment for many years. Nevertheless, the NILOA website certainly gives the impression that other disciplinary organizations might be devoting more consistent attention to this issue. This gap may have part of its origins in skepticism. In a response to Graff's position, Kim Emery has argued against engaging in assessment because the key to academic life is that "intellectual inquiry leads to unexpected places" and that assessment does the opposite, offering "control and containment in place of open-ended exploration" (259). While I think Emery is right to oppose standardization and that good teaching in the humanities must allow for the unexpected and that we need to preserve the possibilities of holding discussions in class that may not be easily digested by a general public, there is I think a silent qualifier in her goal of the "unexpected place," for surely not *any* unexpected place shows student learn-

ing or helps move the class forward. She means, I think, a productive or at least a relevant unexpected place, yet declines to include such a qualifier. With the qualifier, however, we would be compelled to offer at least a working definition of what productive means and where the relevant places might be, which would in turn demand an acknowledgment of the invisible frame that shapes the debate itself.

Like all work in the humanities, literary studies might be less systematic than math or physics, although in fairness many teachers of math and science might tell you that getting at student capacity to grasp the underlying meaning of equations and formulas poses the same kind of challenge.[4] The fluidity, instability, or even mystification of the discipline, however, has been noticed not just from traditionalists, but from more progressive angles as well. Graff describes it as undemocratic and even elitist (*Clueless in Academe*). How can students without backgrounds rich in cultural capital ever hope to figure out how to succeed in a literature program unless we offer them clearly articulated goals? While not writing specifically about classroom learning, William B. Warner and Clifford Siskin have objected to what they see as the outright resistance to definition at the heart of the cultural studies project, which has been adopted by many literature departments precisely for, in their view, its lack of precision. They propose that cultural studies became so popular because it offered an umbrella under which a range of different interests could flourish but remain undefined. While cultural studies claims an interdisciplinary reach, Warner and Siskin suggest that it nevertheless became palatable to English departments through its continued dependence on concerns traditional to literary studies. In their astute analysis, cultural studies combines an interest in "Culture" in the anthropological sense with a continuing commitment to "culture" in the sense of "high culture" (102). Cultural studies, they point out, has neither a well-defined methodology nor a clearly demarcated field of study, a point they take from Simon During's own concession in his history of British cultural studies (qtd. in Warner and Siskin 102).[5] By retaining "Culture" within the broader category of "culture," English departments have not become interdisciplinary, but have instead expanded their disciplinary objects. But while Menand, as mentioned earlier, argues that this expansion could invigorate the discipline, Warner and Siskin conclude that the appeal of cultural studies lies in its "Teflon" surfaces that made this approach so ambiguous that it is now time to abandon it altogether (104).

While Fendrich and Chace see literary studies as a discipline that has destroyed its own object, then, Warner and Siskin see a constant process of reconstitution that takes place through the refusal to articulate central goals. In their view cultural studies needs to be stopped because it 1) has become formulaic and repetitive; 2) has not lived up to its promise to leave behind traditional literary study; and 3) has neither a demarcated field nor a central methodology. It is (3) that is most relevant to this discussion: while not necessarily suggesting that English departments have destroyed their object of study, Warner and Siskin nevertheless identify and object to a lack of definition at the heart of the discipline as currently practiced. Overreliance on the term "culture," in their view, allows us to live comfortably with that lack of definition.

Assessment, however, does not. In spite of the usefulness or strategic avoidance of conflict that a capacious rubric like "cultural studies" may offer to the maintenance of working relations and scholarly practice, outcomes assessment ultimately demands both collaboration and serious thought about disciplinary purposes.

Teaching as Disciplinary Practice

The fact that assessment begins by defining certain goals constitutes its tremendous, even panic-inducing challenge; at the same time, this fact also holds its potential value to literary studies, as it offers the possibility of developing significant insight into a discipline described by so many critics from both the left and the right as lacking a point. While assessment projects may begin in literature programs by identifying certain easily measurable skills (such as the ability to use proper citation), faculty will eventually need to ask searching questions about what they hope to pass along to their students and how they want to transform them. These goals will need to be explored collaboratively.

Graff, Warner, and Siskin do not argue, as do Chace and many others, that literary studies should return to the study of a narrow set of great works of literature (in the case of Warner and Siskin at least, quite the opposite). Yet they seem to be in agreement that intellectual progress and disciplinary health are not well served by an apparently prevailing resistance to definition. Beginning an assessment process does not necessarily bring disciplinary clarity, but in my experience it demands that certain invisible boundaries of a discipline be rendered visible, first to practitioners and then to students. If there really are no boundaries, then we're probably not a discipline. (Parenthetically, I'll say that there might be a case for this and that the universities of the future thus might not have English or history or art departments but just have humanities departments. We might consider whether or not this is desirable. Recently I have heard about many attempts to merge departments on various campuses, but no one seems very happy about them.) Like the prospect of being hanged in a fortnight in Samuel Johnson's observation, assessment concentrates the mind wonderfully. Most of our work, even work that we consider interdisciplinary, takes place within a set of invisible frameworks. Perhaps because the discipline of English has changed so rapidly or perhaps because it has been attacked so relentlessly, the prospect of bringing those frameworks to light seems particularly vexing. Yet this, I think, is exactly what we need to do. I am not implying, of course, that no one is thinking about those frameworks. Arguably the contrary: these issues about the direction of the discipline have attracted enormous attention in the last couple of decades. But while these discussions have brought considerable attention to *what* we teach, fewer have tackled the problems of *how* we teach and *why* we think students have something to learn from our discipline. To get at these stickier questions, I think that reflections on these issues could be enhanced by a more broadly collaborative project in which disciplinary goals, values, and significant contributions emerge through attention to multiple assessment projects, in which a wide

range of teacher-scholars come to terms with and articulate the foundational goals of their courses and their programs, and which will lead to a more vigorous and more transparent discussion of disciplinary aims for the future. This would involve better communication and more opportunities for pedagogical discussions at professional meetings, as well as serious consideration of how well we train graduate students for this important part of their jobs. It would also involve more attention to learning on individual campuses—not prizes for "great teachers," but collaboration in shared goals for student learning. We might discover a greater variety than most of us have considered, and/or we might find more in common than we would have thought. Either way, there is probably more information out there about practice than ever. We need to supplement vigorous arguments from leading scholars about the direction of the discipline with a greater awareness of what is evolving in various locations "on the ground." We might think about ways to "reverse-engineer" the discipline through multiple assessment projects as the process of revealing to ourselves and articulating to others what students passing through our classrooms learn. This is not the by-product of disciplinary knowledge; this *is* the discipline.

It may be objected here that I have assumed that our disciplinary goals are the same as our learning outcomes goals, an assumption that would need to take into consideration the fact that we might not actually be teaching those colonized interdisciplinary objects that have entered our research. Certainly there are important ways that teaching and research will not be aligned: research projects often lead us to primary texts that only a specialist could love. Nevertheless, learning goals in our courses can help us see more clearly what we value and reveal to us what needs to be discovered or analyzed or challenged. They can expose gaps in knowledge, or the ways in which time-honored reading strategies need to be rethought, or the way a particular set of texts no longer addresses key issues the course is raising. Further, using assessment as inspiration for scholarship and disciplinary goals makes crystal clear the need for continuing research in the humanities. Students will not be engaged by outdated readings that do not speak to their experiences. The South Sea Bubble looks different now than it did before the recent financial crisis. Mr. Spectator's claim to world citizenship has a different resonance for those raised in an age of globalization.

So in short, I believe that assessment can help us reformulate and more clearly articulate our discipline from the ground up rather than the top down. There are many fine essays by insightful scholars suggesting where literary study needs to go, and scholarly trends can certainly be traced through book reviews, publishers' lists, and the MLA bibliography. But what do we really know about our primary interface with the public and primary point of influence? As Robert Scholes has observed, "Many scientists learn in order to produce new objects and practical procedures. Most humanists learn in order to teach. It's as simple as that" (8). As we engage interdisciplinary possibilities and work in universities structured by scientific careers, we can nevertheless only make a case for our continued existence if we take our difference into account as well. While the biologist may ultimately isolate a gene in albino

cave worms that helps a chemist produce a drug to manage skin cancer, it is the learner transformed, rendered capable of further self-directed inquiry, that will ultimately give us our "deliverable."

Reimagining an educated, critically conscious, aesthetically and ideologically sensitive population as our "deliverable" will not only open us up to greater clarification of our disciplinary goals, but it will also put us in a better position to address the crises with which I began this essay. Most of these issues go considerably beyond the department level and involve decisions being made out of the hands of most literary scholars, but they are nevertheless worth thinking about. Here are some preliminary thoughts about how assessment might contribute. First, assessment puts teaching more prominently on the radar screen, and a higher institutional priority of (or even attention to) student learning is generally good for the humanities. In the sciences, as Scholes convincingly observes, there is a greater separation between research and teaching. Universities, however, tend to be organized on the science model with no recognition of this crucial distinction. Second, in a world in which student learning and transformation become a priority, assessment projects can provide powerful arguments for thinking more carefully about employment conditions of all instructors. Most research suggests that student learning suffers when institutions fail to hire enough instructors with job security (Benjamin). This research needs to become more central to conversations about funding and institutional priorities. Third, if cultures of assessment developed in higher education, those "star treks" discussed by Kirp might not have quite the same kind of priority.

Certainly, there are ways that assessment can be used as micromanagement and to develop destructive forms of standardization. Collaboration within programs can improve student learning, but instructors still need to retain creative control of their classes, to allow for unexpected possibilities, and to appreciate student accomplishments that they may not have anticipated in the rubric.[6] Sometimes assessment seems like pointless bureaucracy or worse, like a higher education version of No Child Left Behind. But if No Child Left Behind taught us anything, it was that "non-response," as David Mazella argues in this volume, "is the worst possible choice" (237). Fuller engagement with the demands of assessment may help us avoid its more troubling potential effects.[7] Departments can always find ways to look like they are assessing to satisfy the pressures of accountability without having the kinds of conversations that a good assessment process can inspire. But just like the student who spends more intellectual and creative energy figuring out how to get around your syllabus than he would need to spend just doing the work, departments probably end up creating more bother for themselves when they fake assessment rather than genuinely engage transformative learning. Good assessment practices could help us productively confront the core of the discipline, its particular challenges, and what it might still has to offer.

NOTES

1   See Graff and Birkenstein in this volume for such a discussion.
2   English and foreign language departments, of course, teach much more than literary studies: they teach rhetoric, language skill, composition, writing across the disciplines and creative writing, to name a few. For present purposes, however, I am focusing on literary studies, a phrase I use as shorthand to cover both the traditional study of literature and various forms of cultural studies now taught in English departments. Whatever the conflicts between "literary" and "cultural" studies, both tend to see themselves as part of the same discipline.
3   The list of disciplines with their professional resources is found on the NILOA website.
4   Many examples of this can be found in Ken Bain's *What the Best College Teachers Do*.
5   Warner and Siskin 102, citing Simon During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1993).
6   On this issue, see Sarah Goodwin's essay in this volume.
7   See the essay in this volume by Pat Belanoff and Tina Good for a powerful elaboration of this proposition.

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BIOGRAPHY

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THE FUTURE OF LITERARY CRITICISM: ASSESSMENT, THE CURRICULARIZED CLASSROOM, AND THICK READING

CHARLES M. TUNG

MOST REVIEWS OF THE STATE of literary studies are some mixture of elegy and coroner's report. As Marjorie Perloff notes in "Crisis in the Humanities? Reconfiguring Literary Study for the Twenty-First Century," "one of our most common genres today is the epitaph for the humanities" (668). But in recent years the writing on the wall—or headstone—has become more emphatic. In light of Perloff's arguments as the 2006 Modern Language Association (MLA) President, one might say that the word *history*, which at first marked the temporal situation of all knowledge once kept out of time's way, now spells the end, not of a particular way of practicing the discipline, but of practicing the discipline at all. As her "Presidential Address 2006" warned, literature departments must confront the current predicament in which "the literary, if it matters at all, is always secondary; it has at best an instrumental value" (655).

What began as a methodological or theoretical difference seems now to have become an institutional and professional problem. Historicism, the very thing that was to make literature important, useful, and worldly, has snuffed out literature's bid for social relevance by revealing to us how inadequate literature is as a definitive, non-trivial expression of the historical or as an effective intervention in it. Moreover, the decentering of ahistorical approaches by an increasingly distant reading appears to have undermined our institutional and disciplinary footing. As Jane Gallop claims in "The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading," "we seem to have given up precisely what the historians envied and to have settled into a permanent position of inferiority. To me this looks like disciplinary suicide" (184).

According to Perloff's "Presidential Address," if we survive this *felo-de-se*, what remains of us will be compelled by administrators to lead lives of comp/rhet desperation. Literary studies, undone by its own zealous interdisciplinarity and meretricious self-obliteration, is now facing a future in which English departments are asked to "concentrate on the study of composition and rhetoric," the practical part of our discipline that has less trouble convincing the world that we "really do teach students things they need to know" (656).[1] This revaluation of the usefulness of literary studies within the univer-

sity has already been expressed by recent rounds of the job market in which, as William Deresiewicz complained, "The lion's share of positions [has been] in rhetoric and composition. That is, not in a field of literature at all but in the teaching of expository writing, the 'service' component of an English department's role within the university."[2]

But perhaps it is here—in the realm of curriculum, classroom, and critical reading practices—that we can begin to rethink the "common theoretical rationale" that Gerald Graff has found lacking in our discipline ("Future" 258), and re-establish our footing and justification in the twenty-first-century university. Perloff's view suggests that composition and rhetoric might be the last tree behind which the truly literary is hiding from "the increasingly socio-logical, political, and anthropological emphasis of English studies" ("President's Column" 4).[3] But I think that insisting on the relation between low "service" and the loftier goals of literary studies might help us frame our work different-ly. It might help us theorize what we do more broadly and more pragmatically, and allow us to recast the speculative problem of the future of literary criti-cism as the institutional problem of the future of the literary curriculum. After all, "the actual state of the profession," as James Sullivan pointed out in a brief response to Perloff's address, shows us that "overwhelmingly, English departments are composition departments" *also* (Sullivan 255).[4]

In this essay, I would like to explore the nature of this *also* and its impact on the prospects for literary studies. Obviously, this exploration will not yield new methods for twenty-first-century knowledge production. But it will involve several unexpected moves that might shape how we think about the future of literary criticism's interpretive project and the reasons why it is worth practic-ing. First, I will suggest that literary studies learn from composition's openness to assessment so that we can begin the communal work of clarifying learning outcomes for literary studies in our particular departments. Guided by these outcomes, which are inevitably grounded in the conflicting practices and val-ues of our profession, we can then use the assessment principle of "backward design" to rebuild our curricula. Not only would the reverse-engineering of the literature major help undo our exaggerated sense of the difference between the autarkic fields of literary studies and the purportedly remedial mechanics of writing courses, but it might change our pedagogical aims. This change consti-tutes my second point. If we respond to Graff's call as the 2008 MLA President to remedy the isolationism of specialization and the individual course, then our common work, which produces what I will call the "curricu-larized classroom," might recast our basic activity—writing readings—as nei-ther close, nor distant, but *thick*. In other words, as composition and research come closer together, our pedagogical aims might shift from the exposure of students to disparate swaths of subject matter, or the recruitment of them into particular territories or "schools," to the development of readers who can compose readings out of the fullest range of methods and the stakes they can articulate in different ways of seeing. Third, since this turn toward the curricu-larized classroom would entail a shift of theoretical focus from both the notion of the text and historicist decenterings of it, to the capacious form of writing

and response that we teach, as well as the ideals informing those argumentative negotiations of disagreement and difference, I will hold out the possibility that we can reconsolidate the discipline by theorizing literary studies in terms of the widest range of critical practices that our curricula can bear, and that we can reassert the discipline's value in a way that does not confuse chastening self-reflection with the self-abnegation that Perloff fears. As I hope to show, my suggestion for literary studies does not aspire to a partisan position in the routine theoretical battles in our field, but rather to a multipartisan and inclusive recasting of our already plural discipline. Against Jonathan Culler's long-standing call for the end of interpretation as the task of literary criticism, reiterated most recently in his book, *The Literary in Theory*, I will propose an expanded hermeneutic project—thick reading—that might justify, secure, and reproduce literary studies in as much of its perspectival multiplicity as possible, without sacrificing either Culler's concern for the historical and ideological "mechanisms that produce meaning in social and cultural life" (248), or the modes of inquiring, understanding, and experiencing that we idealize as readers.

I

Assessment has always partnered better with composition than with literature. But what would happen if we joined composition in using assessment judiciously to help us refocus concern on the survival, viability, and strength of literary studies? As I move toward a discussion of core disciplinary practices, I want to hazard what I know will be an unpopular proposal: assessment can help us secure literature's distinctive place in the university by getting us to examine what we are doing in our particular communities, by asking us to reconcile what we do with the ideals of the literary education we envision, and by affording us the space in which to align the goals and critical practices of literary studies with justifications for their continued employment. By requiring us to consider the relations between our individual specializations and our collective and agonistic learning outcomes, assessment can help us construct a future in which our research agendas are not so divorced from our pedagogies, which confirm as they count on our idealizations about the value of our reading and writing. If this were to happen, it would be possible to include the classroom as a compelling site of disciplinary formation.

For most of us in literary studies, assessment seems the least likely to help us flourish. We sense in it dangers ranging from the disciplinary control of knowledge work to the nineteenth-century task of inducting novices into culture in order to reproduce a heritage. Consider the controversy created by Graff's presidential column in the Spring 2008 *MLA Newsletter* (which he later published on the MLA blog "From the President" and on the *Inside Higher Ed* website). In this piece, "Assessment Changes Everything," Graff proposed, as a solution to the many institutional ills diagnosed in his books *Professing Literature* and *Clueless in Academe*, a shift away from the "Best-Student Fetish" and "Great-Teacher Fetish" to an educational model in which we collectively articulate the ways we want to help all students learn, and then pay attention to what and

how we do (3). Such a shift must take place at the departmental and professional level because, in spite of the presence of great individual teachers, student learning as a whole suffers in atomized curricula of disconnected courses. Assessment, argues Graff, obliges us "to correlate and align our courses," to "operate not as classroom divas and prima donnas but as team players" (4), in order to prevent the "mixed-message curriculum" and the inhibition of argumentative engagement that results from the university's isolation of intellectual diversity (3).

From colleagues on both the left and right, Graff's argument immediately drew fierce opposition for the way the assessment of our practices projects clear ideological messages. On the MLA blog, Russell Potter expressed disappointment at hearing "the President of MLA mouth such inanities as 'learning outcomes assessment,'" since "education cannot be measured, quantified, or defined to everyone's satisfaction.… [W]hen all is said and done, what we do is not something that we can 'know.'"[5] Later, Barbara Foley called assessment conformist and conservative, because it is driven by "administrators—and, behind them, boards of governors and trustees—to make higher education more productive for U.S. capital in the era of intensified global competition.… OA [outcomes assessment] is basically No Child Left Behind as applied to higher education." Michael Bennett logged on to confirm these contexts in which assessment not only appears as "an organized effort to discipline faculty, staff, and students," but also functions as a distraction from the larger issue of "the casualization and corporatization of academic labor." And on the *Inside Higher Ed* website, Laurie Fendrich likened Graff's vision of assessment to "Maoist indoctrination," an effect that her *Chronicle of Higher Education* essay, "A Pedagogical Straitjacket," described as a consequence of the humanities' self-inflicted demise: "we in higher education … have, of course, brought this plague of pedagogical bean counters upon ourselves. We've spent the past half-century merrily 'deconstructing' our subjects and declaring that the idea of a knowable core of what we teach is null and void."

Assessment as murdering to dissect, as misplaced empiricist reification, as politically conservative external imposition, as preparation for the beehive of global capital, as disciplining mechanism and strategic distraction, as Maoist indoctrination, as both guilt for and crime against the humanities—assessment seems to be the worst possible candidate for the rethinking of our discipline. Because there are indeed odious forms of assessment—reductive, external measurements that differ from the proprioception of particular discourse communities—it is not hard to understand the reaction to the poking and probing of literature, which can cause a colleague's face to darken and fall like the holy countenance in Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of St. Thomas*. From an equally scandalized position, Thomas becomes a centurion in the service of power, money, and official knowledges.

But these reactions are based on the uses and understandings of both assessment and literary studies that the profession has the potential to modify to its advantage. While empiricist reckonings might be depressingly frequent and the conservative contexts ubiquitous, many departments have followed

successfully Sherry Linkon's recommendation to "change the way assessment is practiced and understood" by making it serve "the holistic nature of a good college education," as well as using it to solidify the discipline's position in a competitive and underfunded environment. For instance, my own department has resisted reductive psychometric models in favor of what my colleagues John Bean, Theresa Earenfight, and David Carrithers have called "discourse-based assessment" (7). This style of practicing assessment draws on Barbara Walvoord's "emphasis on the course-embedded assignment and on the professional expertise of the individual professor, whose experience in grading student work is the foundational assessment act" (Bean et al. 6-7). Remaining grounded in their own experience as teachers, individual department members come together to discuss and make explicit their projections of disciplinary competence informing their grading of student performances. The collective articulation of the interpretive and argumentative moves they expect in the work of seniors leads to the formulation of general departmental projections: we ask what the end goals of our curriculum are, what we want our students to be able to do, and how that ability can be made visible and evaluated at different stages in the variety of curricular arcs we offer.

Obviously this approach to assessment initiates a long and difficult process, the specter of which is often enough to make the agonistic articulation of curricular outcomes seem like an antagonistic impossibility. But these departmental discussions can also be surprisingly fruitful and engaging in their focus on how we want our seniors to "do" the major—the kind of capstone seminar paper or undergraduate research conference paper, for example, that we might want to see them write. Once a set of broad outcomes is formulated by a department based on its range of in-house practices and disciplinary ideals, then faculty members can begin to address the equally challenging issue: how do they work backward from these outcomes to establish the paths leading up to these goals? What are the structures that need to be created—assignments, sequences of assignments, flexible relations among courses—in order to help literature majors build the strength to reach these objectives? Faculty must work together to analyze specific student exercises within specific courses at specific points in the curriculum. These analyses of the curricular location of particular skills and assignments help the department to use "backward design" to coordinate assignments and modify the relations among courses. The construction of visible paths to the ends of the major helps students learn to become the readers and writers who can engage the complicated objects in our particular fields of expertise.

I do not have the space here to provide examples of the assignment sequences and relations among courses produced by my own department's process. In any case, the sequence and relations will always differ according to departments' specific and diverse constellations of faculty.[6] Indeed, the particular sequence of skills and methods is less important than the collective effort to discuss and make explicit to students a rationale for their learning different ways of complicating texts from different teachers (as opposed to their checking off coverage requirements). Moreover, in light of the ideal of thick reading

that emerges out of communal efforts, the order of our courses is designed not so much to produce a progression from basic to advanced, in which development is construed as "simply getting better at the same task over a period of time" (Carroll 23). It is rather to create situations in which students learn to see increasingly the thickness and complexity of signifying objects and "to write in forms more diverse and complex than those they could produce when they entered college" (23). My own community's discussions produced an agreement that we did not want students simply to get better and better at, say, Marxist demystifications or structuralist analyses, but to learn to construct thick, researched, argumentative readings of signifying objects that could enter into, for instance, the perspectives of a Marxist or structuralist, while simultaneously pushing against the views that might be held by our department's postcolonialist or new media specialist. Or vice versa—the configurations are not prescribable.

The payoff for going to the trouble of curricularizing the classroom and formulating outcomes that we track and substantiate over the course of our programs is clearly not just pedagogical but disciplinary. To adopt the simple logic of discourse-based assessment—that the collective projection of any goal is made realizable and improvable by the articulation of a process to meet it, followed by self-reflection on what might be modified for future iterations—is also to work together to situate the kinds of reading, thinking, and writing we teach in relation to our projections of the discipline as a whole and its survival instead of just the content we cover. Refusing to let curricular outcomes continue to go without saying would mean articulating what we are doing to achieve the kind of majors who will benefit from and carry on our distinctive type of inquiry. And saying what goes without saying involves us in the negotiation of disagreement about the relationship between what we are doing, what we idealize in that doing, and what those idealizations might blind us to. This negotiation, which is exemplified in the many different shapes of thick reading, is fundamental to inquiry in the humanities, and, in combination with the kind of seeing upon which it relies, may be one of the best ideals of literary studies.

I will say more on this reading and seeing below, but for now I want to note how hard it is to calculate the advantage of this ideal in the present environment. Even if we are able to change the way we think about assessment, the responses to Graff imply that we see the discipline as either something that cannot be known, or a body of knowledge whose marginalized position makes it susceptible to, or helps it evade and subvert, the regulatory grasp of master discourses. As a departmentalized field, literary studies has always seemed to be fighting off an epistemic culture in which our knowledge of things ultimately becomes a measure of their value and a disclosure of fields of power. According to Daniel Green, this situation explains why the New Critics gave "the guardianship of literature to the academy in the first place," a move "designed to establish literature and literary criticism as indispensable elements in the academic curriculum" (72; 74). In his view, the epistemic establishment of literature in the academy backfired, resulting ultimately in literature's trivialization and commodification in "the twenty-first-century corpo-

ratized university with its emphasis on 'product'" (72). The New Criticism's "most lasting effect," says Green, "may have been to demonstrate they [literature and literary criticism] are entirely inessential to academic study" (74).

But perhaps literary studies now is faced with the necessity, or opportunity, of tactically rethinking its content-focused goals of producing unruly, "useless" knowledges or highly relevant socio-historical facts. It certainly ought to continue resisting the urge, created by the New Critical survivalism described by Green, to justify the discipline in terms of mystical non-discursive truths. None of these has worked in securing literature's place in the university and general culture. Moreover, a strategic shift in disciplinary rationale does not necessarily entail any wholesale rejection of either the epistemological enterprise of literary criticism or the value of aesthetic experience. Criticism can continue to generate knowledge of what texts say and what signifying mechanisms they employ. And even if one believes such knowledge is inadequate to the powers and intensities not containable "in" the text itself, it is nevertheless still the case that being "against interpretation" forecloses the possibility of getting to the place where we might recognize the value of something not entirely mappable by the instruments we have. The student who wants only to sit in quiet reverence before the unknowability of art needs a teacher, not so much to be disabused of the reverence, but to be given a process leading up to it. Of course it is possible to have an experience and miss the meaning, but ideally one returns continually to a puzzle in order to make meaning a part of the significance, and significance a part of the experience.

II

As I mentioned in the previous section, literature professors have provided many reasons to fear and resist assessment. The professional payoff for using assessment might make us apologists for the knowledge factory and blind us to the reasons why historicization and the bid for social relevance have been dissolving literary studies into both social science and composition. The classroom and curriculum might form a discipline whose shape is drawn entirely by power and repressions. From another perspective, the classroom and the institution of the modern university have always been poor homes for literature, and strengthening its place there would only ensure its reduction to the knowledge regulated by departmentalization. But I think that assessment's emphasis on the curricularized classroom can help us secure our place in a quite inclusive way—without sacrificing our distinctive justification, which is based not only on knowledge, but on the humanistic understanding and aesthetic experience produced by literary reading. It can remedy some of the languor of our self-consuming situation without asking us to surrender our ability to criticize overly narrow definitions of the discipline.

Discourse-based assessment does this by challenging faculty to construct complex and capacious idealizations that are provisional and revisable rather than timeless and universal. These idealizations are not only the learning outcomes and curricular goals of our pedagogy, but also that which arises out of

them—the continual projections of and arguments about what deserves to be retaught, improved, and recast under shifting conditions. In my argument, what is worthy of continued life is not just a content or a skill, but the construction of and openness to perspectival multiplicity, and the agonistic engagement of difference through argument common to interpretive fields in the humanities. Well-argued, multifaceted disagreement is one of our best goals, since it requires an aspectual seeing that is central to literary studies.

Without idealizations, and perhaps without the particular idealization above, the profession's ability to maintain or re-establish its footing in the university becomes unlikely. We would remain in the condition that Elizabeth Renker, in her recent book, *The Origins of American Literature Studies: An Institutional History*, calls "post-curricular" (127). An effect of the wikipedification of knowledge and the increasing power of the student as consumer, post-curricularity is nearly finished displacing the old "top-down, scholar-driven professional model" of the discipline (127). In the twenty-first century, thinking has become wiki-wiki work, libraries can no longer afford to buy books, and universities find much of the humanities lacking in even the rhetoric of value that might justify continued investment.

To resist the transformation of the discipline into a factory outlet or showroom, to value the democratization of knowledge without confusing it with atomism, we could begin exploring the classroom, not the "top-down" one in which a field is "covered," but the site informed by the idealizations and justifications of our various interpretive practices as they relate to and complicate one another. Indeed, if one accepts Graff's descriptions of departmental life, let alone intellectual culture, it may be that a refusal to have these discussions that assess our collective institutional purpose and presence (as a set of intricately articulated and conflictual processes) is even more of a capitulation to the circumstances in which our "patterned isolation" is exploited by the corporatized university.[7]

The curricularized classroom, which stands as a figure for the skills and ideals we teach, ought to be worth risking the ideological dangers we fear. Its position in a process that aims to repeat itself, not as a static reproduction but as an agonistic, self-revising, and ever more capacious departmental and disciplinary conversation, constitutes the reason why "teaching is central to the humanities," as Robert Scholes pointed out in *Profession 2005*'s "Presidential Forum: The Future of the Humanities": "It is one place where our scholarship manifests itself—or should. Many scientists learn in order to produce new objects and practical procedures. Most humanists learn in order to teach. It's as simple as that" (8).[8] In other words, learning in the humanities gets its value by virtue of the collective idealizations that make it worth sharing, rather than by the production of novelty or practical use *per se*. Although we usually think of teaching as introducing and establishing a field, and research as enlarging and complicating that field by the production of new knowledge, the humanistic interconnection of the two transforms the classroom into the space in which our practices and new knowledges are in a mutually modifying dialogue with those explicit curricular arguments about what is worth sharing and reproducing in and as a discipline.[9]

III

The future of literary criticism promised by making curricularized teaching more central to our professional self-understanding seems to go against all the major theoretical proposals for the discipline today. Many follow Fredric Jameson's suggestion that "literary criticism is or should be a theoretical kind of symptomatology" (407). Franco Moretti asks us to make "a little pact with the devil: we know how to read texts, now let's learn how *not* to read them" (57). Perloff, as MLA President, calls for a return to poetics, as does Culler in *The Literary in Theory*. By contrast, the argumentative reading that results from communal assessments and curricular projections maintains and expands the fundamentally hermeneutic nature of literary studies. While my suggestion seems like a partisan one in light of the numerous critical and theoretical battles waged in our field, it is in fact a pluralist, multipartisan position. Thick reading promises no earth-shatteringly new method or knowledge, but it offers distinct advantages, since it maintains literary studies' focus on significant objects and structures without giving up literature's extra-textual and interdisciplinary concerns. In the remainder of this essay, I would like to describe the advantages that a thick reading built on the curricularized classroom offers over distant reading, which is most often focused on history, and over poetics, which emphasizes mechanisms of signification.

Although there can be no one model for thick reading, I want to rough it in as a compositional-interpretive practice and suggest its benefits by providing an oversimplified sketch of what I think is a very common lower-division path for students. At the start of a first-year class, a student will often see literary criticism's best work as little more than personal impression or simple plot summary. Since the student has no sense of how the literary or cultural object functions as complex set of devices, the teacher tells the student to quit asking what the text is saying and start asking how the text is saying it. Perhaps the next teacher emphasizes prosody; the next, a theme played out in figures of speech and thought. The student keeps hearing the phrase "close reading." At this level, the form of the student's paper starts to shift from "The poem is about X, which I think is depressing" and "The author means X," to "The poem is using Y and doing Z" or "The poem is using Y and doing Z to say X." Soon thereafter, the student takes some survey lectures and several interesting courses organized around a historical moment or cultural node. The teachers invite the student to consider not only the devices but also the material and cultural contexts in which the text's saying, and the reader's personal impressions, acquire a particular inflection at a specific time. For the majority of students (and not the high-achieving few who flourish because they are already able to detect invisible curricular connections), papers often begin to look like this: "This novel draws on a bunch of other writers and the Bible," or "This poem is all about the French Revolution," or the supremely indexical "In the text there is the theme of the machine uprising and the erasure of the human."

Depending on what might be taking place or what happens next, the direction in which the student is going is not so bad. The close reading to

which many students are still introduced seems, as Heather Murray notes, "basic to the pedagogic practice we value most highly, the detailed discussion" (195). And Gallop, who has asked us to return to close reading from historicism's "more authoritarian model of transmitting preprocessed knowledge," says that it makes active learning possible (184). But it is a part of the history of our discipline that the special knowledge derived from the study of how a text works could not establish why the activity mattered, except to say that it somehow created a replacement for religion's truths. Since this contraction drew criticism away from the noise of the world, contextualizations of all kinds came to rescue literary studies from the vacuum that was simultaneously irrelevant and politically reactionary. So where does the student go now?

It is easy to see why symptomatology and distant reading drew an opportunistic lesson about relevance from modernism—a lesson whose wisdom has turned out to be, in Lawrence Rainey's words, that "the best reading of a work may, on some occasions, be one that does not read it at all" (*Institutions* 106). But this wisdom is too costly. While close reading, as Charles Altieri puts it, "had come to prefer text to act (or Brooks to Burke) so that it could not adequately open itself to the range of human interests [generating efforts at literary expression and understanding]" ("Taking Lyrics Literally" 259), the new distant reading's zoom out from the well-wrought urn similarly loses its justification for why cultural phenomena like literature ought to command attention over anything else that opens onto underlying contextual conditions.[10] The road that began with New Critical explications of the text itself and ends with Jameson's "mode-of-production analysis" (408) leads us to a justification of method by way of important historical stakes and gives us some explanatory purchase on our objects. But it also seems to make literary studies largely beside the point. Hyperopic not-reading no longer needs literature as a crucial evidentiary site, nor, more importantly, the criticism required to engage it. And when it does, as Moretti provocatively shows us in "Conjectures on World Literature," the analysis, *contra* Cleanth Brooks, is almost entirely footnotes.

Both Perloff and Culler have rejected symptomatology, and both call, from different directions, for a return to poetics as the answer to the problem of our self-consuming institutional space.[11] For Perloff, poetics' focus on the materiality of linguistic constructions—on "how language actually works and what it does" ("Crisis" 671)—can restore literary studies' disciplinary identity from its epistemically oriented, overly thematizing identifications with history, sociology, and anthropology. For Culler, literary studies ought to give up "the lure of interpretation" for the structuralist investigation of signifying systems and mechanisms (*Literary* 230), which would maintain literary studies' pivotal position in the interdisciplinary linguistic turn. Together, both of these strategies have the advantage of emphasizing what literature does, and what textual and cultural work it performs, as opposed to what information it bears. They thereby resist the seductions of the interpretive project and the repetitious thematic criticism that comes from our desire to extract messages from texts.

This interpretive project captured literary studies in the first place because "if people want to study works of literature, it is generally because they think

these works have important things to tell them and they want to know what those things are" (Culler, *Literary* 230). But the will to knowledge of the message too often committed readers to the narrow hermeneutics of intended meanings, blinding them to the way meanings are made possible, inflected, and even negated by systems of conventions. To correct this problem, Culler wants us to widen our view using the model of linguistics, which would allow us to see beyond meanings to their conditions of possibility and intelligibility. The primary task of the discipline then, the activity formative of the discipline, would be the "attention to mechanisms of signification in texts and text-like situations" ("Future" 30), the description and exposition of codes.

However, if we divorce poetics entirely from interpretation, it becomes difficult, even pointless, to say what a text's effects are for. We lose any motivation to articulate argumentatively the significance of a textual performance's use of a signifying mechanism, since our focus has zoomed out, like linguistics, to "the underlying set of rules—the grammar" (Culler, *Literary* 229). The goal would become to make these rules explicit rather than to generate an argument about how the text's conscious or unconscious use of such rules significantly informs or deforms its possible and arguable meanings. The effect of foregrounding poetics at the expense of interpretation is that the text becomes at best the aperture onto "the mechanisms of linguistic and social interaction" (172). Think of the student papers that extensively treat a linguistic or ideological mechanism but cannot fold that discussion into one that articulates why it is important to talk about the mechanism in relation to *this* particular literary instantiation. If the instance is merely incidental, then the method of analysis and the object of exposition may as well belong to a different, more "socially relevant" field of study.

Rather than raising up poetics as the answer to disciplinary crisis, it would be better to expand the hermeneutic orientation to include the concerns of poetics, as well as all the other approaches to the multiplicity of significances that always exceed the narrow concern for "the meaning." In other words, instead of casting our critical activity as peering through an aperture, I propose that we think of it as engaging the thickness of the signifying object, the dense interweaving of *significances* it comprises. This kind of reading means identifying interpretive problems and constructing arguments in a way that is open to the social and political significances inevitably projected by the history of language's use, but refusing the easy pragmatism in which the play of significances condenses too quickly into simple meanings or expressions of forms of life. This expanded hermeneutics would turn E.D. Hirsch's distinction between meaning and significance upside-down, since it is not interested in the validity of interpretation but in the multiplicity of arguable angles, which presuppose the multiplicity of significant resonances created by the intersections of many different strands of many different discourses. A text's message, and even a text's disruption or refusal of meaning, is but one significant aspect.

The interest in the thickness of the literary or cultural object as constructed by multiple readings (both iterative and methodologically divergent) retains the appreciation for both the formal and technical defamiliarization of refer-

ential language idealized in Perloff's call for poetics. It also preserves Culler's concern for the analysis of linguistic and historical structures that make the production of meanings possible. As an ideal outcome of a literary curriculum, the capacious practice of interpretation seeks to construct a view of the object comprising the broadest range of significances projected by the text. Such an excess of significances or interpretive aspects may come not only from formal devices and the manner in which they are wielded, but also from the situation of the reader, and from the encompassing context or historical itinerary in which reader and object cross paths. No source takes priority over the other: while each may generate different semantic weights and pressures within an argument, none can be taken as the sole ground of aspectuality, whether that source be language, intention, genres, devices, or history. Regardless of the provenance of significances, these aspects are activated by a basic, literary kind of activity—by posing interpretive questions and composing a justification that gathers as many particular details of the signifying object as possible and articulates why they are important for understanding, experiencing, or identifying with this particular, resonant organization of signifiers.

IV

If our recent MLA presidents are right about the present of our profession, then the future of literary studies will depend on how well we invite students into this reading-seeing-writing practice at the heart of the literary curriculum. This practice might very well begin with Graff's and Birkenstein's textbook move, "*They Say"/"I Say.*" But while the composition of a basic case requires pushing against an alternate position, thick reading also requires listening for the multiplicity of possible resonances and listening to the multiplicity of critical rationales that would give the "They say" and "I say" move its substance and stakes. By treating the curricularized classroom as the site of disciplinary formation, we invite students into a truly plural discourse community gathered around a distinctive and valuable mode of inquiry and response, a shared way of questioning and arguing, in addition to a provisional body of conflictual knowledge. It is assessment, I have been arguing, that can help us construct this expanded hermeneutic project out of our many collective desires, not only to know, but to experience, understand, perform, inhabit, and proprioceive.

Discourse-based assessment would press us to generate capacious idealizations that remain fluid and revisable. These idealizations would impact not only our course outcomes and program goals, but also our disciplinary and professional self-projections. The thick reading that results from our openness to multiplicity and our argumentative engagement of difference would stand as a distinctive disciplinary activity. For example, consider the contrast between the literary reading produced by a truly curricularized program, on the one hand, and the lucidity and parsimony idealized in the sciences and social sciences, on the other. In the latter, logical structures must avoid contradictions. But in literary studies, while there are degrees of persuasiveness (itself subject

to argument) in negotiating contradictory aspects, contradiction does not necessarily disable or cancel out a critical reading. Rather, contradiction often forms the condition for a more capacious account, one that is less concerned to explain how the tension was produced by a structure than to build the significance of that tension (and even its production) into the dense and resonant dynamics of the object.

Of course, literary studies, so conceived, could never become the star of the contemporary university. But neither would its identity collapse into history, sociology, or anthropology. And its differences from the other disciplines give it a unique role to play. That role would not involve duplicating the work of producing historical knowledges, but it would continue to see in the texture of signifying objects the epistemological and ethical work of historical witness and social critique. That role would not entail the mapping of codes or the exposition of signifying mechanisms without some sense of how their meaning-production can be articulated to their meaningful uses and projections. Its power would come less from producing transgressive knowledges and more from inculcating a supple, dialogical, and responsive way of seeing, understanding, and experiencing, out of which transgression amasses its stakes. It would refigure the indignity of mere "service" work into a composition of the full complexity of the world, in which making judgments based exclusively on knowledge claims seem too narrow and mechanical a form of participation. And the role of literary studies would help us balance our proofs and explications with an interrogative and aspectual orientation that can continue nonetheless to maintain our chastening desires to be the less deceived.

If the "history of modernism and the New Criticism is inevitably a history of the rise of the modern university as well," as Rainey and Louis Menand say in their introduction to *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (8), then my argument here ultimately calls for a rethinking of the standard alignment between modernism and the New Criticism, and of at least one of the purposes of the modern university. For modernism, when faced with a receding Sea of Faith, did not simply turn to anti-scientistic, non-discursive truths. In the absence of "timeless universals," modernism initiated the critical project whose aim was an active perspectivism in time. It was happy to give up truth for the critical and imaginative energies generated by its method of comprehensive, even encyclopedic, constructivism. The lesson of modernism is therefore not justly embodied in the New Critical mission, which, as the standard argument goes, was to protect timeless meaning from the impositions of epistemic culture by means of paradox, ambiguity, and its bracketing of the world. It is better epitomized by the cultivation of artistic, literary qualities of attention—the aspectual seeing typical of complex interpretation—whereby ambiguity is often far too frugal and placid to describe the engagement with significant objects.

The university of the twenty-first century might thus be called to a purpose in excess of its commitment to professionalized knowledges, and literary studies might make use of assessment to facilitate this call. The commitment to knowledge, as W.J.T. Mitchell recently pointed out in his 2003 symposium

on "*Critical Inquiry* in the Twenty-First Century," can never be too well served, in light of the Iraq War that was pushed through by a government and a culture "immune to persuasion, argument, reason, or even the flow of accurate information" (327). But the other purpose that the corporatized university might yet take up could be informed by the "medium" idealizations which attach to Mitchell's "medium theory"—the idealizations that do not combat, negate, or revolutionize knowledge so much as they focus on the way that our objects of study, and we, actively generate orientations toward knowledge, compose forms of experience that justify reading and writing as powerfully orienting activities, and locate supple, analogical, aspectual seeing at the heart of inquiry itself.[12] The bleak times that Perloff sees for our profession will be the result, not of our inability to offer "a body of knowledge," "definable expertise," or a stable method for evaluating texts ("Presidential Address" 655), but of our inability to cast the multiplicity of our knowledges, skills, and methods as more than a loose bag of incompatible stuff.

Assessment can help us to transform literary studies' much-bemoaned grab-bag of critical practices into a strange and dynamic array, a resource that continues to render cultural products and moments as thick, striated, and internally differentiated. A fully curricularized discipline, in the sense outlined above, would maintain the historical form of seeing inspired by the cultural anthropology of Clifford Geertz and the New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt. But its hermeneutic and argumentative core would steer it away from the sheer description and the hyperopic explanation of poetics, cultural or otherwise. As far as our institutional status goes, I hope literary studies' "medium" project steers us between two fates: the situation of the early I.A. Richards, who, because he was not salaried by Magdalene College, had to collect money from his students weekly at the classroom door; and the total absorption of literature into high-bandwidth information dumps and knowledge work, a predicament allegorized by Alan Liu's recent updating of the epilogue to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, in which the shot of Greenblatt reading Geertz on the plane is engulfed by the wider scene of "corporate intelligentsia" typing away on their laptops (*Laws of Cool* 4).

NOTES

1   Perloff questions current practices of "interdisciplinarity" by asking about the identifiability of the disciplines between which an "inter-" might fall. She claims that "it would be more accurate to call the predominant activi-

ty of contemporary literary scholars *other-disciplinary* rather than interdisciplinary" ("Presidential Address" 655; original emphasis).

2   Deresiewicz examined the MLA's 2007 *Job Information List* in his cranky online review of Gerald Graff's twentieth-anniversary reprint of *Professing Literature*. For the exact numbers, see David Laurence, Natalia Lusin, and Stephen Olsen, "Report on Trends in the MLA *Job Information List*, September 2007." In Table 6 of that report, 29.1% of jobs in 2006-07 were indexed under "Composition and Rhetoric." The next highest number was 28.2%, for "Literature, British Isles."

3   That tree has a branch called "Creative Writing." In her column, subtitled "'Creative Writing' among the Disciplines," Perloff found that the creative cousin of composition studies is also on the rise. Examining the 2006 *Job Information List*, Perloff found 103 positions in "Creative Writing and Journalism" but only 36 in twentieth-century literature (4).

4   Sullivan ends his letter with a question: "What would happen if the MLA elected its presidents from an activist bottom rather than a prestigious top?" (255). Perloff responded: "Sullivan will be happy to hear that Gerald Graff, the 2008 MLA president, whose fields of specialization include composition theory and the pedagogy of English teaching, plans to focus on precisely the issues Sullivan has in mind" (256). To me, Graff's MLA presidency signaled the profession's need, or at least its opportunity, to rethink the discipline by exploring the relationship between "service" and profession, teaching and research.

5   All postings on the MLA blog and the *Inside Higher Ed* website can be found at <http://www.mla.org/blog&topic=121> and <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2008/02/21/graff> respectively. On the MLA blog, Graff's original text seems to have been replaced by another article, but can be found in the *MLA Newsletter* 40.1 (2008): 3-4.

6   If the reader does have an interest, I am in the process of finishing a pedagogy article called "From Close Reading to Thick Reading, Or, Is There A Curriculum In This Class?" Here I describe the specific pedagogical and curricular adjustments we made to our program, as well as the problems we are still discovering in the common curricular intuitions about the foundational status of historical surveys or close reading courses.

7   "Patterned isolation" is a phrase from Laurence Veysey's *The Emergence of the American University* (338), which Graff uses in his crusade against disciplinary fragmentation and incoherence in *Professing Literature*.

8   Scholes continues: "Which means that we need to evaluate scholarship as it manifests itself in teaching and not just in objects like published books" (8). This speaks to another face of the crisis of the discipline, the way in which the distinction between research and teaching feeds into the corporatized university looking to cut "unproductive" faculty. John Guillory's contribution to this 2005 forum in *Profession* calls for a "conversation about the evaluation of humanities scholarship," so that we acknowledge that "increasing the quantity of scholarship cannot improve its quality" (28; 33). Our methods of self-evaluation, Guillory argues, impacts the public

valuing of the humanities as a whole.

9   A side benefit of this would be that, instead of thinking of our classes as representing our various specialized research interests, "we should think of our publications as another mode of teaching" (Scholes 8). Compare my curricular stance and its justifications with Charles Altieri's description of the situation: "Literary studies is a discipline with a long history of critical idealization in search of authority, and literary critics have long and problematic histories of taking pleasure and a sense of power from what they teach and explain. One might argue that the discipline has little else to offer except this personal satisfaction, since it tends to be too speculative for philosophical argument and too cynical or self-reflexive in its concern for the intricacy of particular texts to provide the kind of data and representative anecdotes most historians still desire" (*Canons* 5).

10   In Altieri's account, the lack of stakes (of whether something works or doesn't) led to an overemphasis on meaning, which at first was cast as the celebration of anti-scientific, non-discursive truths, then as themes organizing the totality of the structure, and finally as the socio-historical knowledge of contexts. In his resistance to "epistemically oriented Enlightenment values" ("Taking Lyrics Literally" 260), Altieri makes a case for an outcome that is not self-knowledge but rather the identifications a text makes available based not on content but performative energies.

11   See Culler, *Literary* 9, as well as "The Future of Criticism," in which he characterizes earlier, pre-structuralist interdisciplinary work as "reductionist, ignoring complexities of literary language and making the text, in effect, a symptom, whose true meaning lay elsewhere" (29). See also Perloff's "Crisis in the Humanities": "For cultural criticism, the only real justification for literary study is the concession that poems and novels can do 'cultural work.' From this perspective, a poetic text is primarily to be understood as a symptom of the larger culture to which it belongs and as an index to particular historical or cultural markers" (673).

12   Mitchell was divided between asking thinkers to "sober up about the [revolutionary] expectations critical theory can realistically envision today" and calling for a turn to "medium theory," which could best explore socio-epistemic conditions by its tactical position in a *durée* longer than the explosive instant, by flying below the explanatory ambitions of "high theory," and by focusing on the mediations of our world in the full range of material forms of signification (332-34). For the editorial board members' responses to the problem of the future of inquiry, see the entire issue of *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (2004).

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BIOGRAPHY

Charles M. Tung is Associate Professor of English at Seattle University, where he teaches modernism, literary theory, and Asian American literature. He is completing a book manuscript entitled "Reimagining the Present: Modernist Temporalities, Alternate Historicity, and Time Travel," which connects modernism's obsession with time to later cultural projects that imagine history and the present otherwise.

A PROGRESSIVE CASE FOR EDUCATIONAL STANDARDIZATION: HOW NOT TO RESPOND TO CALLS FOR COMMON STANDARDS

GERALD GRAFF AND CATHY BIRKENSTEIN

IN THE RESPONSES FROM HIGHER education to the "Spellings Report," the 2006 Commission report to Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, one particular argument was made over and over again: that educational standardization of the sort implicitly called for in the Report—and by others in the Standards Movement—is neither possible nor desirable. According to this argument, the standardization entailed by the Report's recommendations would destroy what makes American colleges and universities great: their irreducible diversity, which can never be reduced to a common standard or measure of educational effectiveness. And today, as the call for common standards that marked Spellings' tenure under the Bush administration has now been embraced rather than rejected by President Obama's Education Secretary Arne Duncan, who is calling for national "college readiness standards," many in the education world continue to oppose common standards as a threat to educational diversity.

This, we will argue, is the wrong way to respond to calls for common educational standards, particularly in the realm of higher education. Although the "S" word has become virtually synonymous among most academics with pedagogical sterility, we want to make a progressive case for educational standardization by pointing out its unappreciated democratic potential.

The Spellings Report took American higher education to task for what it described as "a remarkable absence of accountability mechanisms" to ensure that colleges help educate as broad a spectrum of students as possible. Specifically, it charged that the nation's colleges and universities had not done enough to align college and high school literacy instruction, leaving many high school students unprepared to go on to college. In addition, the Report charged, many students who do go on to college never complete their degrees, partly because college tuition is so expensive, but also partly because, in the Commission's words, "most colleges and universities don't accept responsibility for making sure that those they admit actually succeed" (United States, x). Furthermore, the Report complained, "there are disturbing signs that many

students who do earn degrees have not actually mastered the reading, writing, and thinking skills" required by today's competitive global knowledge economy, and that "the consequences of these problems are most severe for students from low-income families and for racial and ethnic minorities" (vii).

The solution proposed by the Report was essentially to increase the free-market competition between colleges, heightening the competitive incentives presumably now lagging on campuses to improve the quality of undergraduate education while simultaneously cutting costs. To this end, the Report proposed that common standards be established for college-level work and that college students be tested to determine how much they are learning. Without such common standards and tests, the Report insisted, it would be difficult for high schools to prepare their students for college and for students, parents, and taxpayers to compare the quality of education offered by one college with that of another. Such consumers would be able to assess the return on their investment only if they had a reliable measure of how well different institutions are preparing students to succeed outside college.

A number of aspects of the Report did draw legitimate opposition from higher education. It was and still is legitimate, we think, to fear that the tests the Report proposed for higher education would end up resembling the intellectually dubious tests that still dominate American schools under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). It is also legitimate to fear that the Report represented what Douglas C. Bennett, President of Earlham College, called an attempt "to improve higher education on the cheap" (1), that test results would be used to further defund already financially straightened colleges, that the common standards the Report calls for would be applied in draconian ways without faculty consent, and that these standards would be developed by corporate managers and public officials with little knowledge of academic culture. Finally, it is legitimate, in our view, to be concerned about the free-market ideology underlying the Report and its narrowly vocational vision of higher education.

But opposing the Spellings Report on the grounds that American colleges are too diverse to be judged by any common standard strikes us as unduly defensive and unreflective. Over and over Spellings' critics insisted that any attempt to apply such a common standard to colleges will inevitably result in a "one-size-fits-all" straitjacket that will destroy what is most distinctive about our institutions and the heterogeneous student populations that they serve. Thus in its response to the Report, the American Association of University Professors complained that the Commission seemed oblivious to the harm that its "call for standardization … would inflict on the diverse missions of our colleges and universities" (4). In another response to the Report, Ronald Crutcher, the President of Wheaton College of Massachusetts, asserted that "it would be an enormous mistake to measure each institution by the same yardstick," since "research universities, community colleges, public institutions and private liberal arts colleges have different missions and serve different populations" (2-3). President Bennett of Earlham complained that

> the commission comes dangerously close to implying that a one-size-fits-all measure should be used. The diversity of our institutions' missions and our students calls for a diversity of measures—not some Washington-imposed single test. (1)

Along similar lines, John Churchill, the Secretary of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, insisted that the Report's "demand for common measurement" threatens what has been the strength of American higher education, its "diversity" and "decentralization" (2). And Jill Beck, the President of Lawrence College, argued that we should resist "'one size fits all' test instruments," since "a fundamental strength of higher education is its remarkable institutional diversity." The "Commission's … misguided benchmarks," Beck continued, "have the effect of trying to homogenize American higher education" (3).

We see four major problems with this anti-standardization position. First, the wholesale rejection of common standards fails to distinguish between good and bad forms of standardization. The standardized tests that characterize NCLB (following a long history of assembly-line approaches to schooling) have given standardization such a bad name that it has become too easy to reject standardization *as such* through a sort of guilt by association. As long as we equate all standardization with invidious, NCLB-style testing or the McDonaldization of American culture, we ignore the existence of other forms of standardization—environmental, health, and safety standards, to mention only a few obvious examples—that most of us readily accept or insist on. In the wake of the 2010 British Petroleum oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, it is hard not to see national and even international standards as a good thing for the cause of justice and human welfare.

Second, the blanket rejection of educational standardization is undemocratic. To say that academic competence can't be judged by any standardized measure mystifies such competence by turning it into a matter of taste or whim—an ineffable *je ne sais quoi* mysteriously possessed by a minority of superior talents—rather than a set of practices that can be identified, modeled, and made generally accessible. It's a short step from telling the Spellings Commission, "Sorry, but we colleges are just too diverse to be measured by any common standard," to telling *students*, "Sorry, but the basic skills that you need to succeed in college are just too complex and heterogeneous to be explained to you clearly."

Third, attacks on educational standardization simply mirror and reinforce American education's disconnected, fragmented status quo. American colleges today can indeed be proud of their impressive intellectual and disciplinary diversity. What is far less impressive, however—and here we agree with Spellings—is their record in helping students negotiate that diversity by providing them with the skills needed to make sense of it. Given the discontinuities of the educational system (discontinuities that standardization would help counteract), students have no assurance that what they learn in one grade level, institution, discipline, or course will be recognized, rewarded, and built on in the next. A minority of high achievers manages to see through the cur-

ricular disconnection to detect the fundamental critical thinking skills that underlie effective academic work in any course or discipline. The majority, however, must resort to the familiar tactic of giving each successive instructor whatever he or she seems to want and then doing that again with the next instructor and the next. For these students, giving instructors whatever they want—assuming students can figure out what that is in the first place—replaces cumulative socialization into academic ways of thinking and writing. College thus becomes a sequence of disciplines and courses, each tending to present a different picture of what academic work looks like, but few having the overarching status that a more standardized curriculum would confer. Even when some courses *do* have such an overarching status, as in first-year composition and introductory courses, there is often little uniformity between such courses, or instructors of other courses don't refer to these courses or even know what is going on in them.

Last and most important, it is simply not true, as the anti-standardization argument has it, that colleges are so diverse that they share no common standards. Just because two people, for instance, don't share an interest in baseball or cooking, it does not follow that they don't have other things in common. Nor does it follow that, because several colleges have different types of faculties or serve different student populations, they can share no common pedagogical goals. A marketing instructor at a community college, a Biblical studies instructor at a church-affiliated college, and a feminist literature instructor at an Ivy League research university would presumably differ radically in their disciplinary expertise, their intellectual outlooks, and the students they teach, but it would be surprising if there were not a great deal of common ground in what they regard as acceptable college-level work. At the end of the day, these instructors would probably agree—or *should* agree—that college-educated students, regardless of their background or major, should be critical thinkers, meaning that, at a minimum, they should be able to read a college-level text, offer a pertinent summary of its central claim, and a relevant response, whether to agree with it, to complicate its claims, or to offer a critique. Furthermore, though these instructors might expect students at different types of institutions to carry out these skills with varying degrees of sophistication, they would still probably agree that any institution that persisted in graduating large numbers of students deficient in these fundamental critical thinking skills should be asked to regroup and figure out how to do its job better.

Spellings' critics insisted, however, that such apparent agreement is illusory. Thus in his response to the Report, Lee Shulman, then-President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, argued that though educators may seem to agree on the importance of critical thinking as a standard for college-level work, the term is used to mean so many different things that its usefulness as a standard is undermined. As Shulman put it, "common educational goals like 'critical thinking' … are often invoked for quite different achievements…. No single set of measures can do justice to all those variations" (1). Like Spellings' other critics mentioned above, Shulman demanded that colleges be free to take "many different approaches to higher education"

rather than being forced to converge "on the 'one best system'" (1).

But we need go no further than Shulman's own prose—or that of other Spellings critics—for an example of the critical thinking skills whose commonality he denied. Even as Shulman *claimed* that the concept of critical thinking is hopelessly diffuse, his writing, like that of Spellings' other critics, *showed* that it involves such basic moves as:

- Locating a controversial issue or problem;
- Accurately summarizing the views of others;
- Framing and explaining quotations;
- Offering one's own argument and explaining why it matters;
- Moving between one's own position and the one being responded to without confusing readers;
- Weighing evidence;
- Anticipating counterarguments;
- Drawing conclusions.

These fundamentals—whose ubiquity in the intellectual world Shulman denies—are precisely those that most students fail to learn. And in our view, students will go on failing to learn these fundamentals unless they are standardized across all domains and levels—that is, are represented with enough redundancy, consistency, and transparency that students can recognize them *as* fundamentals rather than as one instructor's arbitrary preferences competing for their attention among many.

In sum, then, there has to be a better way to respond to the call for common standards in higher education than defensively insisting on our irreducible diversity. Instead, we in higher education should be opening up debates on campuses across the country over whether there are common practices that underlie that diversity. If a consensus emerges that there are, as with good leadership we think it will, we should then work collectively—with the full participation of college faculties—to identify and standardize those practices so that students can more readily acquire them. Engaging in this standardization process is important, we think, not just because, without it, NCLB-style versions of standardization may be imposed on us unwillingly, but because intelligent standardization is critical to our mission of democratic education, which entails being as explicit as possible about the key moves of academic success, and helping as many students as we can to master them. In our view, higher education *does* need common standards, even if some of those calling for the standards have a political agenda many of us disagree with.

But how can the fundamental moves of critical thinking be standardized: that is, represented with enough consistency and redundancy across the curriculum that all students—not just the elite few—can see these moves *as* fundamental? And how can this be done in a way that allows the educational results to be assessed and measured?

The first step, in our view, is to identify and name these fundamentals in terms that are simple and familiar enough to be grasped and retained by the

vast majority of students as they move from course to course, but comprehensive enough to do justice to the complexity and heterogeneity of academic practices. Our candidate for such a formulation, as we have already suggested, is the practice of summary and response. On the one hand, summarizing and responding is a familiar argumentative skill that students have practiced virtually every day since childhood (e.g., "But you said if I cleaned up my room tonight I could go out with my friends."). As we see it, summary and response gets as close as any formulation can to the universally human call-and-response practice of making claims not out of the blue, but as responses to others. On the other hand, summarizing and responding encompasses all of the most advanced academic skills, including (in addition to those listed earlier) close reading, interpretation, and analysis, working with factual, statistical, and textual forms of evidence, and even the ethical ability to entertain opposing perspectives, putting ourselves in the shoes of those who disagree with us. And though this summary-response practice is deployed in different ways in different academic disciplines, there is no discipline that does not require that we enter a conversation, stating our views not in a vacuum but (as Shulman's comments demonstrated above) as a response to what others in the field have said or might say.

Describing this transdisciplinary practice in more polemical terms, the influential rhetoric and composition specialist, David Bartholomae, observes that

> the best student writing works against a conventional point of view…. The more successful writers set themselves … against what they defined as some more naïve way of talking about their subject—against "those who think that …"—or against earlier, more naïve versions of themselves—"once I thought that." (641)

If this view is right—that the best student writing engages (challenges or adds to) other perspectives—then why withhold this crucial information from students? Why not be explicit about this key to academic success?

But this first step—highlighting summary-response across the grades, disciplines, and courses—is not enough. A second step is needed in which we go beyond simply *explaining* that responding to others is the central move of academic culture, and provide training devices—concrete templates or scaffoldings—that enable students to *enact* this move in their writing.

Bartholomae provides an example of such a training heuristic when he recalls one of his undergraduate teachers once suggesting to him that, whenever he was stuck for something to say in his writing, he try out the following "machine":

> While most readers of _____ have said _____, a close and careful reading shows that _____. (641)

For students unsure about the basic shape of academic discourse, a scaffolding like this could help them make a claim and indicate why that claim matters by

showing what alternate claim it is correcting, supplementing, complicating, or otherwise is in dialogue with.

Following Bartholomae's lead, we have published a textbook, *"They Say"/"I Say"*, in which we provide templates like the following that prompt students to engage dialectically with the views of other thinkers and writers:

> In recent discussions of _____, a controversial issue has been whether _____. On the one hand, some argue that _____. From this perspective, _____. On the other hand, however, others argue that _____. In the words of one of this view's main proponents, "_____." According to this view, _____. In sum, then, the issue is whether _____ or _____.
>
> My own view is that _____. Though I concede that _____, I still maintain that _____. For example, _____. Though some might object that _____, I reply that _____. The issue is important because _____.

At first glance, it is easy to dismiss such formulaic devices for being too mechanical and prescriptive. But these complaints ignore the fact that such models are open to improvisation. These complaints also ignore the fact that, while experienced writers unconsciously absorb models like this through their reading, most students do not. Most students will never make a move like "My point is not _____, but _____," or even "I agree (or disagree) because _____" unless given explicit prompts for doing so.

Indeed, there is even reason to believe that it is not just humble undergraduates, but graduate students and faculty members as well, who need explicit help making these key academic moves. In a textbook addressed to graduate student writers across the academic disciplines, John Swales and Christine Feak explain that to establish the importance of their own claims, writers must "indicate the gap in previous research" by "reviewing previous research" (244). In a textbook addressed to thesis and dissertation writers, Irene L. Clark offers the following formulas for entering academic conversations:

> Some scholars who write about this topic say _____. Other scholars who write about this topic disagree. They say _____. My own idea about this topic is _____. (20-21)

Along similar lines, the National Academy of Education requires applicants for its postdoctoral fellowship to complete the following template in fifty words or fewer: "Most scholars in the field now believe …; as a result of my study …" (National Academy of Education).

Likewise, the editors of the leading science journal *Nature* feel obliged to provide prospective contributors with writing guidelines that follow a classic summary/response format, requiring that all submissions open with a clear

declaration not just of the authors' central findings, but of how those findings compare with "previous knowledge" (Nature Publishing Group). If, as these examples suggest, even those at the highest reaches of academe need explicit help making the standard moves of academic critical literacy, think how much more struggling undergraduate and high school students need it.

Dialectical templates like these can also help meet one of the key challenges of outcomes assessment: avoiding what might be called the laundry list trap, in which so many different assessment criteria are offered that assessment ends up mirroring the fragmented academic curriculum itself, so overwhelming students that they come away with no solid grasp of academic literacy's basic shape. This trap can be avoided by developing exit examinations—and gearing courses and programs around them—that ask students to enter the academic conversation. For example, at the completion of any course or program of study, students could be asked to compose exit essays, using templates like the following that reveal the extent to which they have learned to frame and then enter a conversation in their field:

> Before I began my major in _____, I, probably like most people, assumed that _____. But having studied the field, I now see that it's far more complicated, primarily because _____.
>
> In contrast to some researchers in the field of _____ who suggest _____, other researchers suggest _____. My own view is that _____.

Though assessment templates like these might look disarmingly simple, completing them would actually require students to command a full range of academic competencies, from demonstrating familiarity with basic information in the field and knowledge of its key terms, concepts, and controversies to the ability to manage basic writing mechanics.

Is this, then, a one-size-fits-all approach? Yes. And that's precisely why we think it has a chance to work, especially if it can be implemented democratically, with a high degree of faculty buy-in. For the more we proliferate multiple objectives and standards, the less chance there is that large numbers of students—or teachers, for that matter—will assimilate any of them. Conversely, the more we standardize—that is, collectively streamline, simplify, and reinforce—what it is we want students to learn the more chance we have of making academic critical literacy available on a mass democratic scale.

A version of this essay was originally published in the May-June 2008 issue of Academe. *It can be found online at* <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/academe/2008/MJ/Feat/graf.htm>.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Gerald Graff has been teaching since taking his PhD at Stanford University in 1963, first at the University of New Mexico, subsequently at Northwestern University, the University of Chicago, and currently at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is the author, among other books, of *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (U of Chicago P, 1987), *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling*

Obscures the Life of the Mind (Yale UP, 2003), and with Cathy Birkenstein, *"They Say"/"I Say": The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* (Norton, 2007). Especially known for his arguments on behalf of "teaching the conflicts," Gerald has been a Guggenheim Fellow and a research fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. In 2008, he served as President of the Modern Language Association of America, and in 2010 he received the MLA's Francis Andrew March Award for Distinguished Service to the Profession of English.

Cathy Birkenstein is the co-author with Gerald Graff of the textbook *"They Say"/"I Say": The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* (Norton, 2007) and has published essays on writing in *College English* and, with Gerald, in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *College Composition and Communication*, and *Academe*. She is now at work on a study of common misunderstandings surrounding academic discourse that grows out of her recent *College English* essay, "We Got the Wrong Gal: Rethinking the 'Bad' Academic Writing of Judith Butler." She is a lecturer in English at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where she also co-directs the Writing in the Disciplines program. She has given lectures and workshops with Gerald at numerous colleges.

ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS, ASSESSMENT, AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

DAVID MAZELLA

How I Found Myself Writing an Essay about Assessment

My experience with assessment is probably different from that of most people in English departments, because I learned about it through my involvement with my institution's faculty senate. Because of these associations with the senate, I now view assessment as a matter of faculty governance, see it as necessarily multidisciplinary and collaborative, and regard it as inextricably linked with an ethos of institutional self-improvement. Moreover, because my discussions of assessment took place in the senate rather than in a particular department, assessment became for me something that faculty *did*, not something that was done to them. All these factors helped me develop a more active, faculty-centered perspective on assessment than that held by many of my colleagues, who prefer to remain uninvolved with the assessments going on around them.

I hope that this essay might demonstrate to those faculty members still skeptical about assessment how this activity can advance learning throughout the university, first of all by attending to and potentially enriching the interactions of faculty with students, but also by examining and illuminating other forms of interaction occurring throughout the university and beyond. Assessment has the power to deliver this kind of illumination, I would argue, because it represents an important form of both scholarly inquiry and scholarly communication, one that offers a view of student learning in the aggregate, and allows insights into the nature and quality of the interactions taking place between students and all the other groups involved with instruction and learning on campus.

All these aspects of assessment are on view in the case history I will offer about its role in the creation of a Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) at my home institution, the University of Houston (UH). What I hope this case history will develop is a different view of assessment, one that is faculty-driven, scholarship- and inquiry-based, committed to the improvement of learning, communications, and decision-making at an individual, departmental, and institutional level, and powerful enough to affect even our disciplinary self-understandings. By viewing assessment as intrinsically collaborative and schol-

arly, while having as its core function the encouragement of what is known as "organizational learning," I hope to show that assessment also helps faculty steer their departments and universities, helps them internally align the various parts of the university around student learning, and assists universities in adapting to the exigencies of historical, political, and economic change. Directing and using the results of such assessments then becomes crucial to the development of a new, more self-regulated responsiveness within the university to its publics, and helps faculty and their advocates gather better evidence and devise stronger arguments for the support of higher education.

<p style="text-align:center">*****</p>

My own learning about assessment began with my heavy involvement (as chair of the senate's educational policy committee) with our Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation process, particularly in our Quality Enhancement Program (QEP) targeting undergraduate research, and working with scores of other faculty on a steering committee that helped select a topic and draw up a university-level QEP proposal.[1] My involvement continued when I co-created and taught a collaborative QEP grant-supported course and joined a QEP Assessment Task Force that has been working to measure the impact of our QEP efforts since 2008.[2]

Working on the QEP was pivotal for me because it forced me to articulate and refine the views about teaching I had held for over fifteen years, but it also made me confront a question I had never considered before, the notion of really assessing the impact of what I was doing in the classroom. As with many other accreditation activities, the SACS QEP grant programs are very straightforward about the need for grant-supported courses to document how they differ from existing courses and how they will measure the impact of their innovations on student learning (Commission on Colleges 21). This sort of demand was utterly new to me, and, like most other literature faculty, I had no idea how I might document or measure the effects of my teaching or course design. So I began my work on the QEP, as both an instructor and as one of the faculty helping to manage the program, with a thoroughly naïve view of assessment.

The teaching assessments I had previously experienced had not helped me see their connection to learning, either. Until my involvement with the QEP, assessment was mostly about the brown envelope I received at the beginning of every semester, which was filled with the previous semester's student evaluations. This envelope held my students' handwritten comments, along with some numbers I otherwise paid very little attention to. I always enjoyed the good comments, and resolved to do better in response to the not-so-good comments, but the whole enterprise seemed entirely disconnected from what I was trying to accomplish with my students.

My real learning about assessment, however, began when the faculty senate leadership, myself included, decided that our university's drive towards "tier-one" (meaning nationally recognized research university) status had to improve

not just our research profile but our undergraduate teaching, so that these were consonant with our understanding of a tier-one undergraduate experience.

Our aspiration to be recognized as a research university probably requires some additional context to be fully appreciated: the University of Houston is a relatively young, urban, public university that anchors one of the fastest growing regions in the country, and which features one of the most diverse student bodies found in any American public university. Our mission has always been strongly defined by the needs of the city's working- and middle-class students, even as the city and the university have grown together since the 1970s. Providing a wide range of students access to higher education, including graduate and professional education, has always been balanced with our expanding research mission, particularly when Texas has long lagged behind other states in educational attainment, in terms of its high school, college, and advanced degree attainment rates.[3]

The state acknowledged as much when the Texas legislature passed a plan last year to create a special fund that would elevate one or more of the state's emerging research universities to tier-one status, a plan that included benchmarks for both research expenditures and student success indicators (e.g., raised admissions standards and graduation rates) (Kever). Both our new president and the senate leadership agreed that UH needed to start its long climb toward tier-one status right away. They also understood that this effort would require significant faculty participation to improve both the research profile and the undergraduate experience. What gave our efforts extra urgency was the fact that the state had structured the tier-one process competitively, so that aspiring institutions would have to outperform one another if they wanted to get the largest portion of the quite limited pool of funds. Improvements would have to happen sooner rather than later, and at a pace set not by us but by the state's competitive process. The state clearly wanted to see dramatic gains as quickly as possible among the largest possible number of institutions, without ever committing funds to any particular institution's rise to tier-one status.

Apart from the immediate impetus of the state's new plan, another factor motivating the faculty was a long-held view that our institutional performance and research identity had grown out of sync with our local reputation, which remained that of a large commuter school in a city featuring one of the top private universities in the country (Rice University). It is also worth mentioning that the city's elites are for the most part graduates of the two existing tier-one public universities in Texas, the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M. One of the greatest sources of the faculty's dissatisfaction was our fourth-tier designation in the *US News and World Report* (*USNWR*) college rankings, a designation belied by our research expenditures and recognized graduate and professional programs. This designation resulted instead largely from undergraduate indicators like admissions selectivity, graduation rates, average class size, and alumni giving, all of which fall in line with our commuter school profile.

It was this aspect of our academic reputation, the undergraduate experience, which needed to be addressed in a comprehensive way. For this reason,

the senate leadership consistently argued to the faculty, regents, and local politicians that our drive to tier-one status represented not an abandonment, but an expansion of the school's historical identity and mission. The tier-one drive, moreover, announced to all these constituencies that we now play a very different role in the region than we did when the school entered the state public system in 1963. And yet our location within a metropolitan area still experiencing growth meant that our research and teaching missions would always be intimately connected with the expansion of the city and region in which we were embedded.

For all these reasons, the senate leadership decided that, given our positioning within the state's economy and politics, we should publicly announce and formalize the evolving relation of our teaching to our research mission with the establishment of a new center for teaching excellence, which would be run by faculty and based in the senate. Such centers, we knew, were now common elsewhere, but they had never been successfully instituted at UH, because they had previously been treated as largely administrative initiatives with relatively little consultation from the faculty. We were determined this time around to make the input and contributions from the faculty the deciding factor for the creation of this new center.

The center, or CTE, as we called it, would become part of the senate's own program for institutional self-improvement, one that grounded discussions of faculty instruction and student learning around scholarly and collegial notions like evidence-based arguments, peer review, and best practices, which had not always been the case before (Mentkowski and Loacker 83). In this respect, the senate, far from playing a vestigial or symbolic role in governance, instead played a crucial and mediating role as an informal professional forum for voicing faculty concerns about teaching and instruction outside the usual territorial discussions occurring within departments (Birnbaum, "Latent Organizational Functions" 424). Such a mediating role would allow the CTE to become a "safe place" for discussion in which insights concerning instruction on campus could be sifted, gathered together, and redirected toward particular units for the purposes of improvement (Alpert 277).

Working on this project gave every member of the CTE steering committee, including myself, a profoundly different view of assessment, because it offered each of us a campus-wide perspective on teaching and instruction. My background as a teacher of eighteenth-century literature, or as a member of the English department, for example, was not enough for me to answer such large-scale questions by myself; yet my experiences as a teacher of literature turned out to be crucial for my *collaborations* with other faculty from fields like business, biology, and health and human performance. Our visits with faculty across the university made us ask ourselves: how successfully were we instructing our students *as a university*, and where did we need to direct our efforts and our resources?

Assessment, in other words, was looking more and more like the inquiry I was encouraging in my classroom, with all the conditions and caveats that such a definition would entail. Thus, if assessment truly represented a form of inquiry, it would have to be self-directed and -regulated, and motivated by the

learner's own needs, interests, and curiosity, while remaining responsive to the demands represented by existing scholarship, peer review, and collaboration (Zuckerman et al. 202-3). When viewed as scholarly inquiry, assessment becomes a way of continually extending one's own (and the institution's) knowledge about teaching and learning, both in- and outside one's own classroom. But who, precisely, was the "learner" driving these inquiries and pursuing these questions? And how successful would these inquiries be if they remained strictly solitary pursuits?

As I began to collect information and insights about instruction and curriculum from all over campus, I realized that there was a second and yet more difficult dimension to the job facing me and the group, which involved not just learning about conditions of teaching and learning, but in communicating our insights as broadly as possible. Only then would the university learn *as an organization* how to do its work better. Thus, if we wished to boost the university's academic reputation, the CTE steering committee and its various projects would have to help the university *act* upon this knowledge and confront a number of longstanding problems in undergraduate instruction. And this new focus on university-wide "organizational learning," to use the terms of Argyris and Schön, gave me a different view of the workings of my department (Kezar 99-104). So a major part of the challenge became setting aside an individualistic notion of inquiry and research, and thinking instead about broadening the process of learning into a more collaborative form of inquiry.

What this shift in perspective taught me was that in order for assessment to serve learning at this broader, institution-wide level, it must be driven, first of all, by the questions of those most directly involved with instruction, to give its inquiries purpose, direction, and potential usefulness for action. At the same time, assessment must also communicate its findings to the responsible parties to help create a view of learning in the aggregate.

I initially arrived at these insights about the need for organizational learning when I encountered a number of knowledgeable people in different departments and offices whose local experience and expertise seemed utterly absent from any higher-level discussions of instruction. It soon became clear to me, however, that any genuine and lasting improvements would have to come from what Argyris and Schön have termed "double loop" or "deep learning," which allows organizations to engage in better collective deliberations while arriving at better decisions and more effective actions (Smith). If we accept Argyris' definition of learning as the "detection and correction of error," then "single-loop" learning is when organizations learn how to avoid certain kinds of predictable errors, or how to apply their existing knowledge a little bit better: this kind of learning is incremental and essentially unreflective in its behavior (206).

In contrast, Argyris' notion of "double-loop" learning is consciously recursive, self-reflective, and oriented toward problem-solving, decision-making, and collective action: it is "when errors are corrected by changing the governing values and then the actions" (206). To use Argyris' most famous metaphor, "a thermostat is double-loop learning if it questions why it is programmed to measure temperature, and then adjusts the temperature itself" (206). As a the-

ory of the relation of learning to what Argyris terms "antilearning," double-loop learning seems particularly helpful for explaining the difficulties faced by universities in acting upon the disciplinary knowledge their faculty are otherwise gathering and disseminating all the time.

As one scholar of higher education muses in an article about the organizational difficulties of universities, "Does the [fiscal retrenchment of higher education] call for 'single-loop' organizational learning, that is, retaining the existing norms, goals, and structures and doing better the things we are now doing? Or does it call for 'double-loop' learning, that is, reformulating the norms, goals, and structures and embarking in innovative directions to create acceptable outcomes?" (Alpert 242-43). And the answer seems to be that in periods of severe historical crisis and rapid political, economic, and demographic change, only organizations capable of substantively adapting to their changing circumstances—that is, only organizations capable of double-loop learning—will be to able to survive.

Organizational learning involves, however, more than just a "detection and correction of error"; it also entails a self-governing, self-reflexive process of collective deliberation designed to bring to light all the unexamined assumptions (i.e., Argyris' "theories in use"), excluded viewpoints, and alternative solutions that individuals and organizations would rather not confront. It represents a conscious, continuous strategy to minimize or interrupt the kind of defensive reasoning that allows people to avoid confronting the most embarrassing challenges to their views (i.e., what Argyris calls "disconfirmations"). If his prescriptions for double-loop learning are genuinely pursued, Argyris asserts, "defensive routines that are counterproductive to learning are minimized, and genuine learning is facilitated. Embarrassment and threat are not bypassed and covered up; they are engaged" (215).

As a scholar of the historical Enlightenment and its literature, I should add that I am fascinated by the absolute certainty of Argyris' tone regarding the possibilities of a fully conscious "productive reasoning," which seems to recapitulate the most optimistic hopes of Enlightenment thought, without a hint of how those hopes were dashed historically by those who were happy to oppose collective visions of "progress" and "reason."[4] Nonetheless, I believe that this approach provides a useful normative framework for those attempting to think about the structures and behaviors that help large, complex organizations respond to changes in their environment, whether these are economic, political, or demographic.

Assessment, in other words, needs to be seen as a form of collaborative inquiry, undertaken by those most heavily involved with instruction, and conducted in such a way that its findings give further direction to those who would like to practice double-loop learning to further refine and adapt existing disciplinary curricula and teaching practices to the particular needs of their students. Even while assessment attempts to analyze and enhance student learning at an aggregate, program level, it also indirectly gauges this learning as the result of more or less effective interactions between the various stake-

holders at an institution: e.g., how well are students able to incorporate the writing from their first-year composition courses into their subsequent classes? How well can they use the library in their research projects? What percentage of a program's graduates applies successfully to graduate programs? And so forth.

What I would like to do in the remainder of this essay is to use the development of this CTE project to help illuminate the uses of assessment in a number of contexts, contexts that will help to provide a better sense of its purposes, benefits, and limitations. The first "use" of assessment I will examine will be its perennially vexed relation with its institutional shadow, accountability, for which it is continually mistaken and from which it must always distinguish itself. Then I would like use some additional episodes from my own history to illustrate how faculty-driven assessment has to work both within and between departments in the complex organizational structures of the modern university, for the sake of better instruction at the departmental level and better communication among departments at the university level. Both aspects of assessment are necessary to rhetorically coordinate otherwise scattered enhancements of instruction and to promote better learning and more productive interactions at every level of the organization. My final section uses my own background in literary studies to offer a rhetorically based and interdisciplinary perspective on assessment, an eclectic area of scholarship that helps disciplines do their own double-loop learning, by providing members with a view of its effects on students in their first encounters with its characteristic forms of knowledge.

Finally, this essay would betray its commitments to both double-loop learning and humanities pedagogy if it did not introduce some kind of discordant note into its discussion of the faculty role regarding assessment. To paraphrase Marx, faculty may be able to make assessment, but they will not make it just as they please, under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances that are to some extent given and transmitted from the past. It is worth noting that our faculty senate has been able to push our goals of self-improvement and enhanced academic reputation, but only within the context of longstanding stratifications in Texas state politics and higher education policy. Likewise, we have been able to help our institution define its notions of academic "quality," and energetically pursue those goals, but only within a set of academic and economic discourses that by no means automatically favor an institution like ours. Finally, even as we deploy terms like "assessment," "improvement," "responsiveness," or "innovation," we on the senate are thoroughly aware of the historical suspicion that they provoke among fellow faculty members, because of these terms' historical usefulness for the advocates of accountability and corporatist management of the university (Birnbaum, *Management Fads*). Given the history of the accountability movement, we cannot define these terms however we please. Nonetheless, it seems to me that our best hopes as faculty lie with the possibility of using all the rhetorical and conceptual resources at our disposal to rhetorically redescribe and redefine these terms in such a way that they can serve our purposes, and help us represent the university more effectively to the multiple publics it serves.[5]

Doing What We're Supposed to Do, But Only Because We Want to

One of the most memorable exchanges I had during the course of our CTE discussions was at a public forum in which a faculty member asked me whether we were doing this project because "we'd been ordered to by the provost." I was taken aback by this question, because though we had used data like our six-year graduation rates to argue for the need for a CTE, it had never occurred to me that we could be viewed as doing this at someone else's behest, or, as this faculty member explained, because the administration just wanted us "to solve this problem for them." I had always taken for granted the idea that faculty would want their institution to be improved, regardless of whether they were willing to participate or not. What I had not anticipated was a debate over the definition of "improvement," or who got to define it for the university. Nonetheless, this question opened up the whole issue of the motives and agendas underlying not just our efforts to improve instruction, but any efforts toward improvement in an institution like our own. On whose behalf were we doing these things? Who would benefit? And why should others join us? It became imperative that we be able to answer these kinds of questions for skeptical faculty members, if we wished to persuade anyone to participate in this project.

In my own case, I learned early on that it was crucial for my credibility *not* to be seen as an advocate for "accountability," which is omnipresent and much loathed in my state's K-12 system, and which is rapidly expanding throughout the Texas higher education system.[6] At the same time, even while assessment and accountability measures moved ahead with or without faculty participation, there remains very little agreement in- or outside my university about the value of either assessment or accountability. Not only do accountability advocates in the legislature and business community routinely ignore our representatives, but our own administrators, faculty, and assessment experts rarely agree amongst themselves about the nature of either assessment or accountability.

More tellingly, our discussions on campus, just like discussions I have seen in the secondary literature of assessment, featured questions that were continually raised but rarely answered to anyone's satisfaction: assessment experts asked, "Why isn't assessment better integrated into academic culture?"; administrators wondered, "Why don't we use the data we collect?"; and faculty demanded, "Why should we even be *doing* this?" (Ewell, "Perpetual Movement" 3-4). These seemed to be archetypal roles we were each fated to play into eternity. Each group seemed to be entering into the discussion at a different phase, with a different level of acceptance and understanding of what assessment and accountability might mean in a higher education context.

The deadlocked nature of this debate can be traced pretty easily back to the understandable ambivalence of most faculty members toward assessment. They are, after all, the people in the university who are most intimately involved with instruction, apart from the students, but who for the most part have never committed to assessment as part of their scholarly responsibilities, largely because its benefits seem to lie elsewhere. This ambivalence resembles the ambivalence I detected whenever I discussed conditions of teaching and

learning across campus, because they both involved the discomfort faculty manifested when asked to open up their teaching to public scrutiny. This was true even when the public consisted of other faculty. I quickly realized that sharing such classroom information always involves a significant loss of control, especially when faculty do not know how the information could be used or who else might see it. Such self-exposure requires a good deal of accumulated trust before faculty will feel comfortable enough to share information about what goes on in their classrooms.

Thus, one of the causes for the well-known faculty ambivalence toward assessment is not simply its origins in what one assessment expert calls "external bodies" but also because the results of such assessments potentially serve, as he notes, "two very different (and at times incompatible) agendas" (Ewell, "Perpetual Movement" 2). These consist of an *internal* agenda of what I have been calling institutional self-improvement, spurred on and sustained by interested faculty and administrators as stakeholders, and an *external* agenda of "accountability," fostered by outside forces like state agencies, representatives of the business community, accreditation agencies, administrators, and so forth.[7] In our case, we on the CTE steering committee were asked so many times whose agenda we were pursuing, and how we could guarantee that such data would not be hijacked and misused, that we began to stress that establishing a CTE would help to *prevent* such a scenario of abused information. Instead of serving as an unreflective instrument of such information-gathering, we would provide faculty a professional forum to develop our instructional priorities, communicate these priorities to the administration, and ensure that the gathering of information was directed by representative faculty groups rather than administrators.

We learned other things, too, that helped shape the features of the CTE proposal we are currently implementing. For example, we decided very early on that this center should serve the purposes of formative evaluation of teaching (assessment) rather than summative evaluation (accountability). It would help provide electronic and other resources for both individual instructors (including teaching assistants, and both tenure- and non-tenure-track faculty) and larger groups on a voluntary basis, all on the model of "professional development" (O'Day 34-36). It would also house and support our existing university-wide teaching prize committees, and administer a modest summer course-development fellowship for interested faculty. We also hoped to build links with the university's own division of institutional research (IR), so that in-house research regarding university policy like admissions standards, retention and graduation rates, and student engagement could be conducted collaboratively by interested faculty with members of IR, along with grant development. Finally, the center would also house the university's now-scattered teaching assistant (TA) training programs, and assist departments with their training and evaluation of graduate students. What all of these activities shared was a desire to improve the *interactions* taking place within departments regarding instruction (in areas like TA instruction, for example), but also assisting departments as they attempt to enlist help from other parts of the university. In this

respect, the CTE would help facilitate communication about instruction between different parts of the university, and thereby make the interactions themselves more informed and productive.

Yet the role of this center, in keeping with its collegial and collaborative origins, would remain consultative in nature, and would be directed by a faculty board rather than a full-time administrator, at least in the initial stages of implementation (Borden, "Information Support" 177). In all these respects, the establishment of this kind of hub for research and discussion involving teaching and learning should translate into better dissemination of our findings, more general enhancements of teaching, and hopefully an enhanced academic reputation, which is, after all, one of the chief motivations for faculty involvement.

Our hope was that the research orientation and teaching experience of the faculty involved could introduce better information, more reflection, and a broader disciplinary perspective into the university's internal deliberations concerning academic policy, and could help us to continue to refine our understanding of our students and their needs. In this way, the CTE could model organizational learning for both our administration and individual departments.[8]

However, in order to convince the faculty who remained suspicious of our motives and unsure of the value of what we proposed, we engaged in a two-year long process of collective deliberation designed to gather input from as many stakeholders as possible throughout the university, including two faculty forums designed to collect suggestions and preview our proposal, before we submitted a fully worked out proposal to the provost in May 2010. Only by remaining fully transparent in our deliberations, communicating our intentions to the university community, and publicizing the results of our efforts, could we demonstrate our commitment to serving both the university and the faculty as a whole. And indeed, this commitment to communicate our efforts and to remain a collegial and consultative rather than an administrative unit is what distinguishes our efforts from the accountability measures that are continually being devised by the state.

Doing What We're Supposed to Do, Because We Have To

While we on the CTE steering committee have been focusing on the improvement of instruction at UH, the state legislature had in the meantime mandated its own accountability measures. Texas House Bill 2504 (HB 2504), which was passed in 2009, requires that public universities make accessible on the Internet the cost of attendance, course syllabi, and student course evaluations for every course taught on- or off-campus, along with faculty salary information.[9] The difference in priorities is instructive, since the purpose of HB 2504 does not appear to be enhancing the quality of instruction, but rather to publicize the relative cost of higher education from institution to institution, and to promote the notion of the student evaluation as a key indicator of the quality of instruction.[10] The effect of this legislation, which demonstrates the continued alliance between accountability advocates and the conservative campaign against higher education in our state, has only strength-

ened the faculty's conflation of accountability with assessment. More damagingly, it further eroded the trust necessary for accurate information about instruction to be freely collected, shared, or communicated, either internally or externally.

What the unhappy example of K-12 education under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has shown, however, is that a non-response to such accountability measures is the worst possible choice.[11] Those who work at the non-flagship schools must offer some kind of response to such demands, because such demands are not going to go away. Nor can we expect to prevail with a sandbagging, essentially bureaucratic response of outward compliance, since any of these non-responses will simply invite additional and more invasive oversight. More importantly, the failure of other institutions to respond publicly to these demands leaves vulnerable schools like ours in a position wherein we have neither improved our academic standing, adapted to the changes in our circumstances, nor affected the views of those making the demands. So the non-response response only defers our confrontation with the external forces placing these demands upon us, while leaving us with fewer and fewer resources to defend ourselves.

I think that academics at other institutions might consider what is at stake in the political, institutional, and rhetorical situation we now find ourselves in at UH, where we have been working to improve our institution, and lift ourselves out of strict dependence on the state's formula funding, even while the state imposes new forms of accountability almost every year. For one thing, it shows that other schools' sense of independence may be deceptive, as more and more states experience fiscal crises in the wake of their local recessions and real estate "readjustments." Even the long-time flagship institutions in these states, given an atmosphere of ubiquitous financial crisis created by decades of anti-tax policies, can push once-recognized departments into the crises we have routinely experienced for over thirty years. This is perhaps the main reason why most public universities have been seeking out corporate or non-governmental sources of funding since the 1970s, when federal and state governments began decreasing their contributions to higher education (Burke, "Many Faces" 5-9).[12]

So where does this double bind of lessened support and increased oversight leave contemporary universities, whatever their stature and reputation? First, it means that faculty should regard the increasing politicization of higher education as a reflection of the public's genuine interest in the higher education institutions it (under) supports, while also remembering that this concern can become distorted if we define the "public" too narrowly, or follow the cues of a particular portion of the "public" too exclusively.[13] Second, it means that institutions of higher education must learn how to acknowledge their responsibilities to the broadest and most representative portions of the public, and communicate what we do as transparently as possible to all these groups. Third, it means accepting the notion that the politicization of higher education, like the politicization of K-12 education, will be around for a long time to come, and will continue to affect our ability to communicate with our mul-

tiple publics. In my view, it is essential that we devise new forms of advocacy for higher education, to address our multiple publics better, and to garner stronger, more widespread, more robust support from the publics we serve.

In order to become better advocates for higher education, however, we need the deep knowledge of our students and the responsiveness to their needs made possible by the robust, faculty-centered forms of assessment I have been describing. Publicly demonstrating this kind of knowledge and responsiveness helps cut down the calls for more accountability and more compliance, by preventing the accountability movement from filling up the discursive space with uncontested images of do-nothing, disengaged faculty. In our case at UH, at an earlier point when the state was considering still more intrusive forms of accountability, the senate was able to cite the QEP and other initiatives in undergraduate research to demonstrate that faculty were heavily involved in initiatives to improve student learning.

The contrast between our own initiatives to improve instruction and the fallout from HB 2504 helps further clarify the differences between assessment and accountability, because one gathers its information for faculty to improve instruction, while the other is on the whole indifferent to the actual quality of learning throughout the university. If accountability serves any purpose at all, it exists as a bureaucratic mechanism to alert those outside the university whether its resources are being used efficiently and effectively (Burke, "Many Faces" 2; 10-13). Whether that degree of efficiency or effectiveness actually serves the students, however, is a question that accountability mechanisms can rarely answer. For example, students, in spite of their sensitivity to tuition and fee increases, are generally less happy to find their access to faculty and required courses getting rationed in the name of improved "efficiencies" in course scheduling. Thus, the free-market metaphors of many accountability advocates, which stress a consumer-model for education, ignore the actual consumer behavior of students selecting their colleges on the basis of prestige rather than cost (Zemsky). Likewise, in its drive for "efficiencies," accountability often neglects the needs of non-traditional students who may require additional time to complete their degrees. In sum, there is no reason for universities to take accountability advocates at their word when they claim that they fully or adequately represent the views or needs of the publics that actually sustain the university.

Inside or Outside?

Given the complexity of modern research universities, I do not think it is helpful to make absolute distinctions between "internal" and "external" agendas, or to speak of a "choice" between assessment and accountability. A more workable model of the university's relations with its environment is offered by former City University of New York chancellor and higher education researcher Joseph Burke, who has identified at least *three* distinct yet divergent sets of values, concerns, and interests that help to govern contemporary higher education, which he designates the "academic, civic, and commercial" cultures, respectively ("Many Faces" 9). Burke goes on to argue that these three "legs of

the accountability triangle" represent the three cultures that help sustain American universities, which include not just the academic and disciplinary concerns of the departments, but also two distinct sets of external forces that continually fall into conflict with one another, namely civic and business interests (21-24). We can recognize these kinds of conflicts in the contradictory demands placed upon Texas universities, either to pay our own way with outside research, or to teach ever increasing numbers of students, or both.

Burke admits that the persistent tensions between the business and civic cultures, and their struggles with one another and with the academic culture, make it impossible for universities to opt simply to accept or reject cues coming from outside (9-10). Clearly, a more politically effective strategy is necessary. Yet this mingling of inside and outside forces seems only to have increased since Burke's essay was published six years ago, while declining public support for higher education, increased corporatization, and growing demands for accountability have only accelerated.

Nonetheless, no matter who gets assigned the status of "insiders" or "outsiders," Burke's comprehensive list of the tensions between internal autonomy and external accountability in the academy still seems pertinent to the discussion of improvement and its means. Burke's list of tensions between "internal interest" and "external concern" includes the following pairs:

- Institutional improvement versus external accountability
- Peer review versus external regulation
- Inputs and processes versus outputs and outcomes
- Reputation versus responsiveness
- Consultation versus evaluation
- Prestige versus performance
- Trust versus evidence
- Qualitative versus quantitative evidence. (10)

Though I believe that Burke's hope of reconciling the interests of accountability and institutional autonomy is unrealistic, I agree with his point that this set of tensions would confront any university attempting to improve itself. Every one of these pairs represents choices that admit no definitive answer or prescription: who can say when trust necessarily outweighs performance, or when reputation trumps responsiveness?

From the perspective of assessment, the most noteworthy aspect of Burke's list of tensions is the fact that neither the qualitative evidence encouraged by assessment nor the quantitative evidence favored by accountability are sufficient to satisfy the informational needs of the contemporary university. Both constitute evidence of student learning, and both are necessary for the purposes of improvement and publicity. They each provide distinct though not self-sufficient views of instruction, and each will be useful to the various internal and external audiences for such information. Nonetheless, it seems necessary to reiterate that large-scale institutional improvement seems far more likely to come from an *internally* driven process of assessment and organizational

learning than from the essentially bureaucratic practice of compliance with outside accountability measures (O'Day 28-9).

What Burke's list ultimately suggests, however, is that one of the most important roles of organizational learning in higher education lies in guiding institutions so that every stakeholder—administrators, faculty, and others— learns how to develop an appropriate form of responsiveness that is not simply the reflexive following of cues (whether these come from business interests, legislators, students, etc.), but represents a more dynamic, thoughtful, self-regulated relation to one's environment ("Many Faces" 23). In the complex, changing environments envisioned by Argyris, organizations that lack such self-regulated thinking quickly follow the cues of a single stakeholder straight into catastrophe.

In contrast, a self-regulating university with the capacity for learning would be capable of selecting, and adapting to, whichever external demands might help it thrive under changing circumstances, and would learn how to rhetorically counter, parry, or minimize the demands that would jeopardize its reputation, its quality of instruction, or responsiveness to other stakeholders. This, in any case, is the normative framework set out by Burke. As he asserts, "Higher education [is] inevitably accountable to state priorities, academic concerns, and market forces. [Its colleges and universities] should serve all while submitting to none of these imperatives. Being accountable to each of the three corners of the Accountability Triangle means balancing the response to ensure service without subservience to public priorities, academic concerns, and market forces" (23). This tactical and strategic autonomy, practiced within the constraints of existing public support and servicing public needs, represents what I would regard as the most plausible model of faculty governance at this historical juncture.

This kind of informed balancing is also something faculty should learn, as well, if they wish to keep their own leadership accountable to them for the direction of their departments, colleges, and universities. More realistic expectations, for both rank and file faculty and their chairs and administrators, lead to more consistent and more useful evaluation of their performance, and the presumption that both sides will work harder to respond to those high but not impossible expectations. Thus, "responsiveness" in this expansive sense can be seen not just as an important principle to uphold for external relations, but as part of what makes universities function internally.

Opening Up the Boxes to See What's Inside

When I first began describing the possibility of a CTE to my fellow faculty members, I was surprised and puzzled to receive comments that this was only a device for spying on faculty. Terms like "teaching police," "teaching jail," or (my favorite) "authoritarian fascist monster" were representative of the emotions initially provoked by our proposal, which I naturally regarded as quite benign until I saw the defensiveness it inspired. It was only when I began learning more about the scholarship of assessment that I was able to recognize that these highly negative responses assumed that the CTE's primary purpose

would be administering accountability rather than serving as a faculty-based resource for improvement. Once again, the recurrent anxiety I encountered taught me how important it was to establish a "safe place" to discuss teaching on campus. To sustain such a forum, we would need to build trust about how our discussions would be used, and emphasize that our information-gathering was strictly for the sake of formative and consultative feedback with faculty and departments.

I also found myself repeatedly having to distinguish between the standardized K-12 accountability measures so popular throughout Texas public schools and the decades-old traditions of higher education assessment, which seemed far more pluralistic and receptive to the humanities and performing arts (Ewell, "An Emerging Scholarship"). It was during these discussions that I discovered a whole vein of education policy scholarship about the differing impact of accountability measures like NCLB on various types of schools, and the kinds of institutional cultures, histories, and characteristics that either encouraged or discouraged organizational learning (Abelmann and Elmore; Elmore, "Problem of Capacity"; Fuhrman and Elmore).[14]

One of the leading exponents of this approach, Harvard education policy expert Richard Elmore, has written eloquently about the divergent effects and long-term consequences of such external demands for improvement, when these are placed upon schools in vastly different situations, in terms of community placement, student body characteristics, financial and other resources, internal norms and structures, and so forth (Elmore, "Problem of Stakes"). Elmore's work helped me recognize that many of the difficulties we experienced at UH with accountability measures stemmed from the imposition of a single, uniform standard statewide upon very different institutions with correspondingly different missions, student bodies, and available resources.

More importantly, Elmore also taught me how to talk with my faculty about using our proposed CTE as a place to build up "capacity," in the form not merely of infrastructures, technological support, and so on, but also in terms of knowledge and expertise, as produced by continual inquiry to learn the best ways of reaching our students. In many respects, since our current way of doing things in the classroom had left us with demonstrably unimpressive results (that fourth-tier *USNWR* ranking again), the only hope of change lay in learning how to do things differently, and better, than we were currently doing. These efforts towards producing large-scale change, I would argue over and over again, would be much easier to accomplish with the existence of a centralized forum and resource center like the CTE (Elmore, "Problem of Capacity" 248-58).

At the same time, Elmore identified one of the most frustrating aspects of this kind of organizational work when he noted that

> it is commonplace to conceptualize learning and improvement in school systems as a kind of Chinese box problem, or a problem of "nested learning communities."… Learning that is instrumental to improvement occurs at the individual level, at the group level

within schools, at the school level, and at the system level; each
level of learning is required to support the others; learning at
each level is the reciprocal of learning at all other levels. So
learning at the individual level—teachers and principals, for
example—is instrumental to improving learning of students, but
students provide the feedback that is necessary for adults to learn.
("Problem of Capacity" 251)

Though Elmore is referring here to the organization of American high
schools, the collegial faculty- and department-centered organization of higher
education, along with a long tradition of department-centered governance,
makes it that much more difficult for individual departments to learn and
adapt to new circumstances; each department holds itself accountable not just
to the university, but also to a national or even international disciplinary net-
work or "disciplinary community" that maintains its own standards over and
against local "campus community" and its demands (Alpert 250-59; Elmore,
"Problem of Capacity" 251). This complicates any kind of local, horizontal
communications that might take place around the one topic that these verti-
cally stacked disciplinary units otherwise share: undergraduate teaching
(Alpert 267-69).

The final insight I took from Elmore's work was that accountability initia-
tives, for better or worse, force *every* institution, regardless of its prior history
or current status, to confront the prospect of improvement, but that some
institutions were far better equipped than others to organize themselves
around that goal. Elmore's research has shown that the key difference lies in a
"construct" he calls an institution's "internal accountability," which he defines
as an existing and coherent set of internal norms, structures, resources, and
attitudes that permits the institution to work in concert with itself to accom-
plish the work of improvement; this construct of internal accountability can
either motivate or obstruct organizational learning throughout a school
("Problem of Capacity" 246). This is because success at a task of this scale
demands that an institution coordinate its members' activities, so that each
member helps to advance and sustain its collective mission within her particu-
lar domain. The only way to accomplish this kind of coordination, however, is
by communicating, tacitly or otherwise, the interlocking set of responsibilities,
expectations, and norms that individuals must conform to if they wish to
remain in good standing. While these responsibilities and norms could be set
either high or low, institutions with incoherent internal norms experienced far
greater struggles with the learning, communication, and adaptation necessary
to alter their current, unsuccessful practices.

And yet, unsurprisingly, perhaps, Elmore found that it was far more com-
mon to find schools that were "atomized," or incoherent, or where "individual
preferences account for most of what happens in the organization" ("Problem
of Capacity" 246). Though an institution's failure to reach this kind of conver-
gence might have few consequences under generally stable conditions, this
lack of convergence can still have catastrophic consequences when vulnerable,

fractious, or self-divided institutions are suddenly hit with external demands that tax their capacity to respond.

What Elmore's research makes clear is that *any* demand for improvement, whether internal or external, can have as negative an effect as an economic shock on an organization's infrastructure, if it is not prepared to put the demand into effect. As Elmore explains,

> pushing hard with an external force—such as testing and sanctions—on an atomized organization . . . does not make it a more coherent organization . . . in fact, it often makes the organization more atomized and dysfunctional because people continue to do what they know how to do, and which is exactly what produced the performance that got them in trouble in the first place. ("Problem of Capacity" 246)

This seems to me a helpful way to understand the panic that sometimes emerged out of our discussions. We were witnessing the recognizable panic that overtakes us all whenever we are asked to learn something new; this panic is compounded when we feel that we are not being given the time and resources to learn a new area properly. It is unsurprising, then, that our calls for improvement sometimes provoked the kinds of defensive reasoning identified by Argyris and Schön, though this defensiveness was often accompanied with extraordinarily useful feedback about local problems that were otherwise never acknowledged. These panicky encounters with faculty, however, taught us to keep talking long enough for forum participants to recognize the local problems that needed to be addressed, while showing them how these local problems reflected more systemic issues happening throughout the system.

As Elmore notes, one result of this dynamic is that schools with low internal accountability—or as Argyris would say, well-established "defensive routines" (214)—tend to respond to such external demands by "manag[ing] around the edges of instructional practice, preserving an essentially atomized organization" ("Problems of Capacity" 247). This kind of outwardly compliant behavior "leaves as much as possible of the existing organization intact" (247). In contrast "schools with high internal accountability have norms about what good teaching and learning look like," and are able to accommodate a variety of external demands (e.g., testing, etc.) and perform well on them, "with a minimum of disruption to their internal processes" (247). In other words, schools capable of learning are able to accommodate even the change represented by accountability measures. Thus, the first step toward organizational improvement in even the lowest performing schools is not some free-market style "creative destruction" of existing practices, but better internal organization, an internal and rhetorical alignment of norms and expectations around shared goals. Aligning norms and expectations in this way, as well as building up institutional capacity, helps organizations learn what they need to do differently to improve instruction (O'Day 19).

At this point, however, we should note how differently a term like "self-improvement" resonates at a longtime tier-one school, compared to its effect at a "Wannabe U," which is a school defined more by its *aspirations* to excellence than by its secure possession of those qualities (Tuchman). In that single word, "aspirations," we can find all the pathos and all the frustrations of working at Wannabe U. Consequently, far more risk, and far more anxiety about potential loss of control and reputation, accompanies the admission of the need for self-improvement at Wannabe U, when compared to schools that are already known for a high quality of undergraduate education. This is one of the reasons why building trust and communication among faculty is crucial to getting the entire enterprise of improvement started on the right footing. At the same time, the fact that so many of the terms we might use to describe improvement have already been co-opted by corporate management fads and education consultants makes it all the more crucial that faculty help redefine terms like "improvement," "responsiveness," and "excellence" in ways that make sense in their own institutional, local, and regional settings.

The discomfiting example of Wannabe U should teach *everyone*, not just those working at the innumerable Wannabes scattered all over the country, that aspiration is one of the most important yet also destabilizing motivators we have for education, whether we are talking about individuals or institutions. Aspiration is to some extent rooted in one's dissatisfaction with one's current condition, and it is powerful enough as a motivator to persuade otherwise risk-averse people to undertake a self-transformation whose final effects cannot be predicted. This is a drama I see playing out all the time in my classrooms, and throughout my university.

The real tragedy, however, is when this admirable willingness to assume risk gets diverted, as it does at Wannabe U, into the false hopes and pseudo-transformations of the commodified and bureaucratized version of higher education instigated by the professional administrative caste of Wannabe U. What Wannabe U reminds us is that a form of public "responsiveness" that consists of blindly following the dictates of the marketplace is doomed to satisfy no one, and that no version of institution-wide "improvement" can ever be conjured up by administrative fiat, if it is lacking the commitment and participation of the faculty who must put it into place. What Wannabe U offers instead is a dystopian portrait of the contemporary research university where there is no genuine assessment, no interest in genuine self-improvement, no organizational learning, only market-driven, administrator-imposed, bureaucratically enforced accountability. And who would want to work there?

Assessment Begins at Home

Nonetheless, for all our talk about improvement within the university as a whole, the entire enterprise stands or falls on the basis of our interactions with students in the classroom and with our colleagues in our departments. As I have already noted, however, the vertical, "siloized" disciplinary and research orientations of higher education, as well as the incentive structures that reward this vertical orientation, reinforce the individualism and atomization

that allow faculty to neglect both internal accountability and organizational learning. It is in faculty members' interest to define their departmental responsibilities solely in terms of their disciplinary identities (e.g., "I cover the Victorian period and the nineteenth-century novel."). This exclusively disciplinary understanding of one's responsibilities also makes it more difficult for faculty to accept any degree of oversight for their teaching, to conceive of the curricula in- or outside the department as a product of their collective endeavors, or to deliberate among themselves about the shape or direction of their curricula and programs.

For this reason, it is often difficult for faculty to conceive of their own professional activities as adapting to and interacting with one another, or to recognize how their teaching or curricula could interact with the local environment of the university or other campus communities, a fact that has been recognized ever since the drive to reform undergraduate education began in the 1980s (Alpert 267-69). In this respect, it seems that a non-departmental, informal, collegial and consultative forum like our proposed CTE is the best solution to this blind spot in our organizational structures. Such a conception of the CTE would be able to advocate for instruction across departments, even while individual departments and colleges are focused on the problem of keeping their units whole, not a negligible task in an era of pervasive budget crises.

Yet it is also true that every member of what one scholar has termed the "peer reviewed" professions has a responsibility not only to research and teach within a particular discipline, but also to oversee the curriculum offered by her and her unit to students (Hamilton). It is in this necessarily divided view of faculty members, as individuals teaching specific classes, but also as a group contributing to a collectively produced curriculum, that the role of assessment can truly come into play.

Thus, one of the few activities capable of rhetorically aligning views of instruction throughout the university is a regular, principled discussion of curriculum, teaching, and instruction, along with evidence of its effects, and continual efforts towards their improvement. For the purposes of this collegial discussion, faculty need to supplement their own individual experiences of teaching with what Peter Ewell has termed "locally designed and operated evaluation research," focused on the effects of their overall program on their students, and "centered on learning outcomes," for the purposes of improving teaching and learning within the department ("Can Assessment Serve Accountability" 105). In other words, it is what we have been arguing for all along: assessment as institutional self-improvement.

This notion of a faculty- and departmentally based assessment practice is particularly important for ensuring that assessment takes place in a regular rhythm set by faculty, collected within departments, and regularly revisited during departmental discussions of curricula and their effectiveness. This has the potential to move discussions of curricula out of sterile turf battles or *ad hominem* assaults on particular personalities. It also means that faculty and departments can begin to align their own norms, values, and expectations around improvement in ways that can be linked up to similar initiatives taking

place in other parts of the university. But the principle here is that assessments need to take place and get processed at the level where many critical decisions get made—at the departmental level. But what would this look like?

In his essay, "Some Plain Talk about Assessment," Alan Meyers provides an extremely useful description of how he has incorporated assessment into his everyday decisions about teaching and instruction, by showing that *real* assessment, not the accountability demands we are more familiar with, is "simply another name for what we already do: asking ourselves, are the students learning, and, if they are not doing as well as would like, how can we help them do better?" (20). Meyers's point is that we are thoroughly familiar with the concept and pedagogical purposes of feedback, since we consistently use it in our own teaching to help students improve. So why not elicit better feedback to improve our *own* teaching?

Meyers urges us, then, to begin obtaining this feedback in order to integrate it more fully into our work as teachers, especially as faculty charged with overseeing instruction in our departments. Meyers, however, knows that many literature faculty are unsure of how they might proceed with such information-gathering, or how to put the information to work. The virtue of Meyers' article, however, is to show that this kind of very small-scale, local assessment involves familiar activities, activities like formulating questions and analyzing grades in the aggregate, but brings them into a new context, the context of our own classroom instruction, which can then be scaled up to larger groups of students and faculty and larger-scale tasks of assessment. Though Meyers does not use the term, he is clearly trying to get his faculty readership to recognize this as the challenge of *transferring* knowledge gained in one, familiar area, to a new and unfamiliar domain.

Consequently, Meyers provides a very useful set of strategies for assessing our impact as faculty members at four distinct levels: in everyday classroom interactions, and at the course, departmental, and program levels. At the heart of his method is a regular, periodic process of (self- or group-) questioning designed to garner and then respond productively to the results concerning the instruction we are involved with. According to Meyers, the inquiry process begins with a simple set of questions:

> Asking, What do I (we) want students to do?
> Then asking, Are they doing it well?
> If they are not, change something in the instruction.
> Then, see if the change makes a difference (This requires evidence, usually apart from an instructor's course grades.). (21)

Here, I would make two observations. Meyers' questions oblige us to learn more about the *effects* of our teaching, and demands that we do this by looking beyond our own individual acts of grading, and from a consciously different perspective. And, of course, the potential evidence for such effects could be either quantitative or qualitative, depending on what we were looking for. It could be as simple as asking whether majors who took sophomore-level cours-

es were later prepared for the courses in the major, or whether graduate students' coursework was leading to satisfactory performance in their comprehensive exams. And this kind of question leads us to ask about student performance in the aggregate, as a group moving through a particular course, or tier of courses, to see if larger patterns emerge that the instructor or department should attend to.

As Meyers notes, this process creates a feedback loop that never ends, "as we strive for continual improvement of different outcomes and courses" (21). His heuristic is simple enough to use on one's own courses in an informal way, but still powerful enough to help focus faculty committees undertaking departmental level reviews about the effectiveness of particular tiers of courses (e.g., Is the methods course working? Do we need a capstone? etc.).

The key is recognizing that the feedback loop gives important clues about the next step to take for those who wish to develop more effective forms of instruction. Argyris' notion of organizational learning, however, suggests that the greater the potential impact of the change, the greater the need for an inclusive discussion of the proposed change and its potential effects.

Moreover, if faculty are going to have any input into the collection of performance data or the implementation of results, it will have to be concentrated on the level that one recent article identifies as the "core of faculty governance": the academic unit, meaning the department (Richardson and Smalling 70-71). And yet how many opportunities do faculty have of learning what happens in other faculty members' classrooms? Faculty responsibilities for aspects of instruction like curricular development, evaluation of teaching, and undergraduate education policy mean that without such information, they will find themselves debating many issues of instruction without first-hand knowledge of conditions. So inserting some degree of unobtrusive data collection within departments, with the explicit intention for it to be discussed and acted upon within the department by faculty-run committees, makes it far more likely that it will be used than data collected by outsiders. And, of course, this data can also be shared with the rest of the university and the general public, when departments need to explain the value of their work to others in- and outside the university.

Rhetoric and Interdisciplinary Learning?

One of the biggest obstacles to assessment being truly integrated into our discipline's instruction and curriculum is the still-common assumption that assessment represents an autonomous specialty of its own, complete with its own quantitative, social science methodology. Interestingly, this perception is less common within specialist discussions of the scholarship of assessment than in statehouses and conservative advocacy groups, though there remain segments of the university where these methodological battles are still being fought.[15] Yet this seductive notion of an autonomous assessment allows both faculty and administrators to assume that the best kind of assessment takes place apart from instruction, so that all instructional activity remains uninformed by either the assessment process or its results. This self-isolating notion

of assessment, like the brown envelopes I still receive with the previous semester's evaluations, becomes all too easy for faculty and departments to ignore.

As I have mentioned earlier, the major problem with this division of labor between assessment and instruction is not only that stealth assessment is conducted at a distance from those most affected by it, but also because it denies faculty the opportunity to help *learn* from the process of inquiry. This division of labor allows assessment to be run solely by administrators and staff rather than by the faculty, an arrangement better suited to the hierarchical practices of accountability than the collegial practices of assessment.

My suggestion is that assessment, chiefly in the form of the local and collaborative exercises described by Meyers, should become more like grading, operating in effect as a scholarly protocol of information gathering maintained by the individual instructor, determined by disciplinary context, and unrestricted to a single group of specialists on campus (though departments would certainly need assessment professionals to continue their own institution-wide activities, even while they collaborated with faculty on local assessment projects). This multidisciplinary, collaborative view of assessment, however, also entails that the accountability movement's privileging of quantitative over qualitative understandings cannot hold for work done in the humanities and the arts.

Nonetheless, to keep this version of assessment from becoming too mushy and self-referential, I would also endorse assessment experts Marcia Mentkowski and Georgine Loacker's basic features of a "collaborative scholarship of assessment," namely that

- The activity (i.e., the collaborative scholarship) requires a high level of discipline-related expertise.
- The activity breaks new ground, is innovative.
- The activity can be replicated or elaborated.
- The work and its results can be documented.
- The work and its results can be peer-reviewed.
- The work has significance or impact. (83)

The challenge, of course, is that the forums in which such collaborative scholarship of assessment would be practiced, evaluated, and disseminated would also be multidisciplinary, though focused on creating common, or at least overlapping, "conceptual frameworks" concerning assessment and student learning (89-91). And, of course, the natural site for the generation of such common conceptual frameworks, in the light of local problems with instruction, would be a collaborative, multidisciplinary forum like the CTE.

Finally, a word about "rhetoric," a practice that every member of the CTE steering committee relied upon throughout a year's worth of discussions. Throughout this essay I have been implicitly aligning my collaborative, faculty-driven notion of assessment with the version of interdisciplinarity initiated by the "rhetoric of inquiry" movement, which studies how scholars communicate among themselves and to people outside their disciplines (Nelson et

al. 3).[16] This approach dictates a careful engagement with the evidence, conventions, and forms of argumentation conducted within a particular discipline, while still judging on a case-by-case basis each discipline's competing claims to unity, completeness, self-sufficiency, or dominion over a particular field of human activity or thought. This seems to me to describe the kinds of interactions we necessarily had while trying to persuade members of our home and other disciplines about the necessity for better, more coordinated forms of instruction. It represents yet another instance of both interaction and organizational learning, wherein the disciplines in a particular setting aid one another in a commonly conceived enterprise.

As Bruce Robbins pointed out some time ago, it is precisely the *incompleteness* of every disciplinarily defined field that allows other disciplines to engage productively in a rhetorically mediated interdisciplinary inquiry, and that allows the results in turn to be submitted to a public that includes of course all the other disciplines (Robbins 116; Mailloux 25). As Robbins says, "What produces an incongruity within any field, the presence of the Other in it that keeps it from being entirely and complacently itself, is precisely 'the public,' that is, the discipline's need to legitimate its existence *vis-à-vis* other disciplines and society at large" (116). Robbins' notion of an "incongruity" or "presence of the Other" is a useful reminder that the desire to legitimate one's existence is not an admission of disciplinary weakness (the usual literary-critical anxiety about not being a "real discipline"), but an acknowledgment of the constitutive incompleteness of one's own field of knowledge that allows it to be reviewed and supplemented by all the other disciplines.

These questions of rhetorical mediation and disciplinary incompleteness, in turn, are also relevant to the status of assessment as an academic movement and as an emerging field of scholarship. When distinguished from the more bureaucratic forms of accountability, assessment at the university level represents a historically novel form of inquiry into disciplinary learning that engages critically and productively with other disciplines' preferred self-images of scientific objectivity or humanist ineffability. Assessment could provide information that would challenge and complicate these institutional self-images and trouble the autonomy and self-sufficiency of each field.

At the same time, however, assessment itself represents an eclectic, still provisional *bricolage* of elements from fields like educational psychology, scientific management, and other scholarly traditions that were assembled specifically for the purposes of analyzing instruction done in specific fields and institutional contexts (Ewell, "An Emerging Scholarship" 5-7; Gray 50-51). In this respect, assessment constitutes a form of local knowledge assembled by its practitioners, as well as a built-in challenge to the insular local knowledges of the disciplines whose teaching practices it would evaluate.

To return to the puzzle over the unintegrated status of assessment in the academy, the "perpetual movement" Ewell finds between internal and external forces should not be seen as a sign of its weakness or lack of scholarly integrity, but signifies one of its most crucial functions in the contemporary research university: its rhetorical and mediating function for rendering discipli-

nary knowledge and disciplinary instruction accessible to those who may never experience such teaching first-hand. This is how assessment, when conceived in such an interdisciplinary, scholarly, and rhetorical fashion, helps to produce what Robbins terms an

> opening of what appears to be private in disciplines to public scrutiny and public accountability. This task [he continues] could be described as "public-making": making public or visible, opening to a variety of perspectives and judgments, but also the interdisciplinary fashioning of new publics, new instances of judgment, new collective viewpoints. (116)

It is the openness and expansiveness of these "new publics," however, that takes the chill out of Robbins' un-ironic uses of terms like "public scrutiny and public accountability," and aligns Robbins' account more closely with the guarded democratic optimism of writers like Michael Warner or Charles Taylor.[17] At the same time, Robbins' "public scrutiny" could not be further from the free-market populism of accountability advocates like former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, former University of Texas regent Charles Miller, or the Texas Public Policy Foundation.[18] In the wake of the increasing politicization of higher education, literature faculty need to address and respond to the public's concerns about the responsiveness of their universities through mechanisms capable of communicating, explaining, and perhaps even justifying disciplinary knowledge to those outside academia.

NOTES

1 SACS, like many other regional accreditation agencies, requires its reporting institutions to develop a Quality Enhancement Plan addressing, in the words of the Commission on Colleges *Resource Manual*, a "well-defined topic or issue(s) directly related to student learning" (21). In our case, the topic chosen was undergraduate research.

2 The creation and implementation of this research-intensive course has been documented in an article I co-wrote with UH Librarian Ms. Julie Grob, "'Little Living Libraries': Collaborations between Faculty and

Special Collections Librarians in the Inquiry-Driven Classroom," forthcoming in *portal: Libraries and the Academy*.

3   For example, in the Brookings Institution report, "The State of Metropolitan America," the Houston-Sugarland-Baytown region, which is the 6th fastest growing region out of the 100 metropolitan areas studied, scored 92nd out of 100 in high school attainment, and 54th in completed BA degrees.

4   I would add that there seems to be an important affiliation between Argyris' notions of "antilearning," "defensive reasoning," and "skilled ignorance" (213) and the post-Enlightenment notions of cynical reason and rationalization I explore in my *Making of Modern Cynicism*.

5   For rhetoric as a form of tactical redescription, see my *Cynicism*. For a view of rhetoric as an "art of the weak," see Michel de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life* (37-38).

6   For the historical importance of the Texas model in the formulation role of the national No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, see the essays in Rebell and Wolff.

7   This notion of the potential conflicts between "accountability" and "improvement" has become a staple of many of these discussions of the competing interpretations and implementations of assessments. See, for example, Banta, "Can Assessment for Accountability Complement Assessment for Improvement?" as well as the essays in her edited collection, *Building a Scholarship of Assessment*.

8   Those curious about the current implementation and organization of our CTE may find it on our website.

9   The full text of HB 2504 can be found on the Texas Legislature website.

10   The Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF), a conservative think tank, was the primary supporter for this legislation. See Young, for example. For some of the background, see the TPPF's website. For a summary of their goals for higher education, see Lutz. For a more extensive discussion of their longer-term goals, see Vedder and Denhart. For a cogent response to legislative interference in governance issues, see Simmons and Floyd.

11   Though NCLB was passed with the understanding that "increased resources for education essentials would be provided in return for increased accountability," these increases have not covered the costs of testing and administration, let alone the improvements many educators anticipated; it was the hope of these additional resources that silenced or divided education advocates otherwise suspicious of NCLB. See Rebell and Wolf xv.

12   It is worth noting, however, that an atmosphere of continual budgetary crisis is not an unforeseen event in conservative governance, but represents a deliberate and recognized conservative political strategy to shrink public institutions as far as politically possible.

13   In respect to the conservative assault on higher education, I endorse much of the critique offered by Marc Bousquet. However, it is unclear to me how Bousquet expects his critique of higher education to reach and persuade a larger, less committed segment of the public to reverse the trend

he deplores. The only hope that I can see of movement on this question is identifying a segment of the public not committed to the right-wing assault, and persuading this segment to support politicians committed to greater access to high quality higher education.

14　See Elmore's definition of his comparative approach: "Institutional response theory . . . holds that organizations of all types . . . vary along a number of dimensions that affect their responses to external forces in their environment . . ." ("Problem of Capacity" 246). Though the disciplinary and governance structures of higher education obviously make for significant differences between K-12 schools and universities as organizations, the fallout of the accountability movement has been studied much more extensively for K-12 than in higher education, and so I have drawn on that scholarship to reflect upon the differential impact of accountability on the lesser research universities.

15　See Ewell, "An Emerging Scholarship" 17-18; Mentkowski and Loacker 90. For the continued struggles of writing instruction with quantitative assessment professionals, see Huot.

16　From the same Introduction, see also this statement: "Every field is defined by its own special devices and patterns of rhetoric—by existence theorems, arguments from invisible hands, and appeals to textual probabilities or archives—themselves textures of rhetoric" (Nelson et al. 5).

17　See Warner; Taylor.

18　For Spellings, see Ewell "Assessment and Accountability" 11-13; for Miller as public advocate of accountability, see Reyes and Rincon 49-50; for the TPPF, see note 10.

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BIOGRAPHY

David Mazella is currently an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Houston (UH), specializing in eighteenth-century British literature. His first book, a cultural and conceptual history of the "cynic" and "cynicism" in Great Britain, is entitled *The Making of Modern Cynicism* (U of Virginia P, 2007). Along with his scholarship on eighteenth-century literature, he has also published or has articles forthcoming on the topics of Swift and curricular reform, faculty-librarian collaborations in the research-intensive capstone course, and on integrated reading and information literacy instruction in the English gateway course for majors, all of which are based on his experiences of teaching at UH. His contributions to undergraduate teaching were recognized in 1999 when he won UH's Cooper Teaching Excellence Award, a university-wide teaching prize. Currently a Member-at-Large of the UH Faculty Senate, he has chaired a number of senate committees related to instructional issues. In the summer of 2010, he helped establish the UH Center for Teaching Excellence, and now serves as one of the founding members of its Board of Directors.

Case Studies and Templates

FROM SKEPTICISM TO MEASURED ENTHUSIASM: THE STORY OF TWO LITERARY SCHOLARS' INTRODUCTION TO ASSESSMENT IN THE MAJOR

KIRSTEN T. SAXTON AND AJUAN MARIA MANCE

THIS ESSAY CHARTS OUR SHIFTING attitudes as English professors, from trepidation to measured enthusiasm, for the value of assessment in our field of literary study. Although the English department at Mills College had participated in an assessment of the College's general education composition course, the 2009 assessment was our first assessment of a literature course. How, we asked, could one quantify the sublime and alchemical nature of the teaching of literature? The essay narrates an assessment of our department's entry-level course, "Introduction to Literary Studies," a course designed for first and second year students in the English major, and charts our shifting attitudes toward the usefulness and generative potentiality of assessment of literature courses. We are each associate professors of English at Mills, a small liberal arts women's college in Oakland, California. In the first section of our essay, Kirsten Saxton explains the department's concern about applying quantitative measurements to a literature course and the steps we took to insure that our values informed the assessment process at every stage of its development, resulting in our discovery that assessment can be consistent with our shared department values. In the second section, Ajuan Mance speculates about what might build on our firm foundation, exploring a vision of the potential for assessment to be a transformative tool in the discipline of literary studies, and considering the ways in which assessment might be used as a generative method by which to make diverse texts and, more importantly, diverse theoretical frameworks and approaches meaningfully inherent to the study of literatures.

Part 1: Beginnings: Skepticism and The "Assessment Lady" Bogie
Kirsten T. Saxton

I share an anxiety with a creative writing professor at Mills that I think is quite telling: in response to our department chair's thoughtful and excited request that we submit a proposal to the Modern Language Association (MLA) for a panel on our assessment work, both of us demurred with a bemused worry about being marked as "assessment ladies." Before turning to

my topic at hand—my department's assessment of its (then-named) "Introduction to Literature" course and how this work fits in with our larger departmental assessment project—it is worth unpacking this term and its partly humorous and partly serious underpinnings. First, to be an "assessment lady" is to be marked within the institution, and in the outside world, as one of "them" (not just as an administrator, bad enough, but an "assessment person"). While our official "assessment person" is a universally respected and well-liked administrator (no mean feat indeed!), no faculty member I know wants to be labeled with the dread tag. To be seen as an "assessment person" both implicates one as somehow complicit in what even those of us who are generally "for" the project experience as the administrative time-suck burden of assessment, and labels one as less serious within one's own scholarly or creative endeavor—the standard curse of administrative association writ even larger by the particular dystopic associations of assessment. And the "lady" term, while desultorily thrown out, is telling: assessment work has a tinge of the domestic, the picking up the socks of the institution, an anti-intellectual service component that, despite our logical and philosophical refusal of it, has real emotional and political weight in the arenas of higher education.

In this essay, we refuse the stale opposition that characterizes many discussions of assessment. The terms of the debate are familiar to anyone who would purposefully pick up this volume: on the one hand, we have the specter of assessment as the dread realm of the numbers crunchers, the anti-intellectual adaptation of corporate models, the expensive and self-perpetuating industry that exists to fund layers of administrators and to quash intellectual freedom and meaningful scholarly endeavor. On the other, we have the specter of the violently defensive, autocratic faculty members who refuse reasonable explications, stonewalling clarity in their fear-based and ego-driven insistence on the unassessable alchemy they work in the classroom. Of course, there is some truth and much falsehood in both formulations. Assessment done without nuance is a waste of time at best and dangerous at worst, and faculty hostility to sharing clearly defined goals and criteria by which students are evaluated is unwarranted and unfair.

So, as you gather, I am an assessment team player at Mills,[1] and yet, in writing this essay, I out myself as such in ways that, despite my self-conscious humor, feel risky to me. Part of that risk is endemic to the union/management structures of faculty/administration that are simply part of higher education. Part of it, though, is that—as this volume takes as its topic—assessment runs into particular perceptual roadblocks within my discipline, that of literary study: roadblocks regarding questions of the measurable and the immeasurable, the joy factor, or the sublime, and our fear—a meaningful one—of reducing our students' work and our own to bite-sized enumerated chunks that support only a pragmatic, unsubtle, fundamentally inappropriate and damaging way of approaching the study of literature, that study to which we have committed our personal and professional lives and in which the vast majority of us engage with integrity and for the benefits such study brings to the lives of our students. The benefits exist at the level of what we often term the immeasura-

ble—sublimity and joy and perspective—as well as through students' practice and movement toward what we often identify as the more clearly measurable applications of critical thinking and writing. I suggest that the judicious use of appropriate tools of measurement and the insistence on lucid transparent iterations of our expectations does not impede either benefit, but rather can help students and us better achieve both.

Before you think I have lost my mind, or drunk too deeply from the assessment water cooler, I need to clarify that the following conditions predicate my commitment to assessment within my department and my institution: 1) the careful, nuanced, and narrative nature of our work (its reliance on the evidentiary standard of our own discipline, not that of the business school); 2) the work and its terms are defined and implemented by the faculty and are not externally levied; and 3) the institution's financial support of our projects and assistance in pragmatic help in translating our findings into the language and structures required of the institution and our accrediting board. I bemoan the proliferation of extra work and acronyms, and, when subsumed in cut-and-paste assessment criteria, I crack the occasional pained joke regarding our process of course-by-course assessment rubrics, unfortunately named CARP. However, our discipline-specific assessment of our literary studies courses has been an intellectually rigorous process that is pliant and responsive enough to serve our students and our faculty and has increased, rather than diminished, our capacity creatively to teach students the skills they need to succeed as literature majors.

Some History and the Nuts and Bolts of Our Assessment

Our department first developed the English 10 "Introduction to Literature" course when we realized that, while the entire English faculty ranked close reading at or near the top of the list of skills our majors should demonstrate, we actually were unsure about where we explicitly taught the skills necessary to engage in close reading. While, as committed and excellent teachers, we all taught close reading and the introductory skills sometimes, in some places, we usually fit the subject in around the edges of our attempts to teach exploding canons, barely able to contain the work on content and context, let alone to provide systemic attention to the relation between reading and writing and the myriad incremental steps needed to write a strong, engaging, literature analysis. So we created a new class, a class in which our majors would be introduced to and practice the skills they needed to succeed in our major.[2] We were feeling pretty self-congratulatory about adding a lower division "service" class to our rotations out of the goodness of our teaching hearts, and all went fine through these rotations, or so we thought.

One morning, about a year and a half after we began teaching the class, I received a puzzled call from the registrar's office that a student was unable to add one of her courses, a course which she had been attending for the six weeks since school had been in session. In following through, it turned out that one of our majors had been attending two sections of "Introduction to Literature," that she adored them both, and that nothing *at all* in the syllabus (other than the course number) or in the classroom experience, indicated that

these two classes were different sections of the same course. It seemed that we had created a terrific class, or a variety of classes, but it was self-evident that we needed to take a closer look at what we were actually doing in this class and why. So, I wrote a proposal to the provost's office in which I asked for reasonable, if not at all handsome, funding to support three faculty members (myself and two other literature professors) in what is called a "full-loop assessment" that would run over two years.[3] Additional English faculty would be paid a small stipend to participate in less onerous iterations of the assessment, and then the full department would be consulted and have the opportunity to provide feedback/input because the course is required of all majors. Three tenured literature professors (myself, an eighteenth-century British literature specialist, Diane Cady, a medievalist, and co-author Ajuan Mance, an African-American literature specialist) spearheaded the assessment. We began by informally talking to other faculty who taught the course (each of us had taught it once), collecting syllabi from our own department and from similar courses at other colleges, and making arrangements for the collection of student essays from each section of the class.

We were ready to begin our formal work: we had to come up with a rubric by which we would assess the student papers (collected from each of the "Introduction to Literature" sections over the course of the year). First, we decided we would clarify what we thought the "Introduction to Literature" course should accomplish—what should students learn in this lower division introductory course? What were our overarching goals for student learning? We each came to that meeting with a list. Our combined lists constructed the Platonic ideal of Introduction to Literature courses—if our students could accomplish everything on that list, they would be happily succeeding in doctoral programs by their sophomore years. Our list included, but was even longer than, the following:

> Students should: understand generic difference; be familiar with major trends in literary theory; be encouraged and strengthened as life-long learners and lovers of literature; read well; write clear, logical, argument-based interpretive essays; come up with engaging questions to drive essays; write clear and meaningful thesis statements; master syntax; develop style; choose and use quotes with grace; learn the tools of disciplinary research; engage in close readings of texts; engage in meaningful discussions; have an awareness of politics of canonicity; be familiar with major critical movements and debates in the field; master the MLA style sheet; read a variety of literary works from a variety of genres and styles and periods and authors from a variety of social positions; find their voices—oral and written; find joy and meaning; be strong peer editors; learn literary terms. (Saxton)

All of these elements are indeed important to our students' success in the field, but when we tried to figure out how we could teach them all, and how we could

observe and measure whether we were succeeding, we soon realized our hubris. It became clear why our different sections of the course were so, well, different, and how ill-defined our sense of what this fifteen-week course really was. One class could not possibly do all, or even a majority, of this teaching and learning work.

Our next task was to come up with a better defined set of measurable goals. We each brought a refined goal set to another meeting and honed our list into the one we brought to the department at large for discussion (the meeting included all tenure-track professors as well as those adjunct professors who might teach the course). We asked one professor to serve as a formal facilitator so we would not veer off topic, and we had an intellectually and personally engaging two-hour meeting in which we seriously debated the role of the "Introduction to Literature" class, and thus, of course, the role of the English major, what is teachable, and what is not. We had the kind of discussion we almost never have as a group as we are usually preoccupied with staffing and budgets and so forth.

Our list shifted in smart ways, and the department approved the following:

English 10: Student Learning Outcome Goals

- Students will learn how to write an effective literary analysis.
- Students will learn the skills of close reading.
- Students will become familiar with the genres and conventions of poetry, prose and drama.
- Students will learn MLA documentation and the research methods of the discipline.
- Students will become familiar with the language of the discipline (including critical terminology and concepts) and the critical issues and questions of the field.
- Students will be exposed to the pleasures of critical reading and conversation.

Then our summer work began. We had stacks of student papers to read, and we needed to have a means by which to measure them that would provide specific information (rather than the more general information from a simple letter grade). We needed a rubric. We looked at Introduction to Literature rubrics from other schools and at our own expository writing rubric. We tinkered until we created a guide we felt was specific enough to help us and students, and flexible enough to allow for the subjectivity that is always at play in the response to narrative prose. We then gave the guide to our colleagues, made some minor adjustments based on their input, and came up with the following:

> The rubric for English 10 papers defines six skill-sets and includes four competency rankings.
> **Skills:** thesis; support; organization; style; use of Modern Language Association formatting/citation, and mechanics.
> **Levels of competency:** accomplished (4); competent (3); developing (2); and beginning (1).[4]

We then spent a few long days reading and assessing piles of student essays (with grades and names of teachers and of students removed). Each paper was read separately by two of us. When we finished, we turned the piles of paper over to our assessment office, which tabulated the results.

Our findings were more troubling than we anticipated. Our assessment revealed that students were not adequately performing in five of the six learning outcome goals we had defined. For example, we found that only 13% of student papers demonstrated accomplishment in thesis; 62% were competent, 28% developing, and 9% beginning. The course evaluations and movement of students up within the major supported that the sixth goal (that of the exposure to the pleasures of critical reading and conversation) was being well met. We realized that English 10, as the introduction to the major, needed to be reframed to focus on structured ways to ensure that our students gain the skills they need to succeed across and up through the major.

As a result of our assessment, the major change we made was the nominal and thematic shift of the class from content (the literature we read) to skills (the skills we bring to the reading and discussion of and writing about that literature). Our first act was to rename the course "Introduction to Literary Studies," rather than "Introduction to Literature," a shift that heralded the new focus of the course.

We next turned to the creation of curriculum guidelines to provide a structure for "Introduction to Literary Studies" courses; we realized we needed to create a document that successfully articulated the course goals upon which we had agreed as a department and that offered suggestions/guidelines about how to organize the course so that we could successfully teach to those goals. At this point, the work got sticky. I include our guidelines below and then some discussion of the whys and hows of their iteration. The following are the guidelines we adapted and distributed to all professors teaching the class:

Curriculum Guidelines for Introduction to Literary Study: English 10

Introduction to Literary Studies is a skill-based rather than content-based course.

The course focuses on teaching scaffold skills that will help students write effective literary critical essays.

These skills include:
1. Textual analysis/close reading.
2. Appropriate use of literary terms and concepts.
3. Thesis creation and development.
4. Essay organization.
5. MLA style and documentation.
6. Research tools.

7. Avoidance of plagiarism.

Course materials:
All reading assignments must come from the required texts or be posted on Blackboard (e-reserve).
1. *The Norton Introduction to Literature* (most recent edition).
2. *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (most recent edition).[5]
3. Grammar handbook.

General information:
1. We explain the theoretical and practical structure of the English major and the role of English 10 in the context of the major.
2. Syllabi clearly and succinctly indicate the purpose of each reading assignment (for example, introduction to characterization, discussion of symbolism).
3. Syllabi clearly and succinctly indicate the purpose of each writing assignment (for example, practice explication, differentiation between summary and analysis).
4. Course information sheet includes department English 10 course goals, grading breakdown, and rubric in addition to regular required information.
5. Each course includes a library information session, led by a librarian, on literary research methods (to be scheduled by individual professors with the library).

Reading:
1. Students will read poetry, short fiction (not novels), and one play.
2. Because the course is skill-based, readings should not be excessive, and each reading should serve a clearly articulated purpose.

Writing:
Essays
1. Students will write three graded essays (with built-in draft workshop and revision processes) of no fewer than three and no more than seven pages each.
2. Student essays should not incorporate outside critical works.
3. Student essays should accurately document primary textual source(s).
4. The course will explicitly familiarize students with the tools necessary to write strong essays (see enclosed sample handouts on thesis generation/reverse-outlines/integrating primary texts).

Homework/In-Class Writing Assignments

1. Students will have a variety of graded opportunities to practice the skills required to write successful literary analytic essays.
2. These assignments should provide helpful scaffold opportunities; they are not essays.
3. These homework and in-class assignments should be short and clear; for example, a quiz or a homework assignment on summary versus analysis, or short explication.
4. Students must complete a homework assignment (such as a brief annotated bibliography or a research scavenger hunt) that introduces them to library and on-line research methods in literary study.

Grading:

1. Professors fill out a rubric sheet for each graded student essay and return it with a final letter grade and narrative comment.
2. Grading breakdowns fall within the following guidelines:
   a. Three essays for a total of 60%.
   b. Scaffold-skill based assignments for a total of 30%.
   c. Participation and Attendance for a total of 10% (clearly define participation and record attendance at each session).

In addition to regularizing grading standards (by using our newly minted department rubric), the guidelines regularize the number and weighting of assignments (areas which previously were entirely up to professorial discretion). Before this assessment, the course's only clear and shared requirement was that it covered drama, fiction, and poetry. As a department, it was important to us that we strike a balance between creating parameters and allowing for professorial choice. For example, we agreed that students should all use the same main primary text, but we were leery of limiting professors' control over the course reading content. We chose the *Norton Introduction to Literature* for its wide scope of authors, periods, and genres. (Over the course of the following year, we found that the cost and physical size of the book were prohibitive, and we adopted the shorter edition.)

Our decisions about content and about the number and type of assignment were the result of hard won and complex conversations in which we each became aware of our own stakeholding status in regard to our comfort levels (what assignments we like to give, what we do not, what we want to read, what we do not). For example, our discussions about whether or not "Introduction to Literary Studies" should require a Shakespeare play were contested and tense, although our agreed focus on skills allowed us to decide that we should not use this course as a content band-aid for our loosening up on our major requirement of a Shakespeare course. We kept being seduced by content: of course they should read Shakespeare, and they should read a

diverse variety of authors, from a variety of periods, and perspectives, and formal styles, etc. And we would end up right back in content land, right back where our surveys and genre and period and topical courses were supposed to be. If we wanted Shakespeare, we needed to require that elsewhere, not in our introductory skills class. The same was true regarding coverage of formal and thematic and author-specific texts.

Instead, we made clear that the course must "explain the theoretical and practical structure of the English major and the role of English 10 in the context of the major"—in other words, that the class would make transparent the major's requirements and how they fulfill our mission of teaching diversity, period, genre, nation, and form, as well as depth and breadth. We asked professors to explain notions of literary canonicity and to talk about the ways the structure of our major engages with and takes a position on debates on canonicity. We decided that professors could best teach this course using readings with which they were comfortable and that we did not need to use the course guidelines as a stick with which to beat our colleagues with our own preferences. We had to conclude that we trust one another to teach with integrity and to make content choices that make sense. Our refusal to legislate content, however, led to our decision to require that each reading response have a clear indication of its purpose (a few words or a clause), of what the professor wanted it to "do" in the class. As a teacher, I hate writing these notations. However, this requirement has proven a truly wonderful intellectual challenge in that I have to articulate, to myself and to my class, why we are reading Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" (it exemplifies the ode form), why we are reading James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" (a means to discuss symbolism in fiction), why we are reading Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" (the development of character)—and in all three cases, because these are works I know well and love and find teachable (which I tell them). I find that my evaluations, already good, skyrocket when I make explicit such pedagogical drives.

In regard to assignments, we decided revision and opportunities to practice the skills we demand are essential. While we all believed this, none of our previous "Introduction to Literature" syllabi actually demonstrated this belief. My earlier syllabus included four or five essays, a number of undirected responses to the readings, and very little overt teaching of the writing skills I so pride myself on teaching well. Now, we all require only three formal essays (each with multiple draft steps). We agreed that we do not want students to use critics at this stage of their writing since what they need to work on in their papers is the construction of their own interpretive arguments. However, we want them to have some discipline-specific introduction to the library (something we realized we had never offered our students formally). So we require a reference library workshop led by a librarian; that session is followed by a scavenger hunt assignment that requires students to find, but not to read, a number of sources and materials. We ask that each professor remain true to the "sort" of materials we ask students to find, but to use her own reading materials as the basis for the hunt. For example, my assignment asks students to find, among other things: a critical book on

Hamlet that was published before 1950; a scholarly article written within the past three years that approaches *Hamlet* through a feminist lens; a popular review of a production of *Hamlet*; the complete *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of "nunnery"; and a critical article that looks at flower images in the play. We also require that professors offer a number of opportunities to practice the writing skills needed to craft a successful literary analysis; for example, that students practice close readings, summary and paraphrase activities, and thesis generation. We decided that professors were best positioned to choose the assignments that their students needed and so we left the specifics up to each teacher.

Full Loop: Teaching Our New Class

After the department had taught a full year of "Introduction to Literary Studies" courses according to our revised curriculum guidelines, we asked each professor to collect student papers for review the following summer. That summer we returned to them with our rubrics. We also asked each professor to give us informal feedback on what worked and what did not. The results (both informal and formal) were informative: there was a 10% jump in the category of "accomplished" theses and a 7% jump in that of "competent" ones, for example. Overall, essays were more accomplished and better organized with stronger support and much more accurate in their use of MLA citation than in our initial assessment. We had a jump in accomplished (the strongest) papers overall, and a decrease in beginning (or the weakest) ones. Student evaluations were up in the classes and professors' qualitative feedback was positive.

Intra-departmental buzz around the subject of student preparedness suggests that the "Introduction to Literary Studies" assessment has made a lasting impact on the quality of student work across the department. Faculty across the department comment that students who have completed our revised "Introduction to Literary Studies" course demonstrate greater confidence and skill in the areas of critical thinking and analysis, skills reflected in their engagement in class discussion as well as in their written work. The "Introduction to Literary Studies" assessment precipitated changes in the structure of the course that have enhanced its effectiveness as a gateway into the discipline.

Part 2: The Future of Assessment in the Major: Literature, Diversity, and Measuring the Unmeasurable
Ajuan Maria Mance

In the previous section, Kirsten T. Saxton describes her thoughts on the Mills College "Introduction to Literary Studies" assessment, as well as the details of our process and its outcomes. In this portion of our essay, I will address some of the ways that this work has led not only to my measured enthusiasm for the possibilities of nuanced assessment of introductory level, skills-based English courses, but also to my budding interest in the ways that assessment could support and enhance the engagement of both students and faculty with diverse literatures and methods of analysis. I am especially interested in considering the role that assessment could play as literature departments move beyond concep-

tions of diversity education (also called multicultural education), in which students' exposure to women writers, queer writers, and writers of color is primarily concentrated in courses structured around those sub-specialties, and toward a more inclusive vision in which diverse texts, theoretical frameworks, and modes of analysis are incorporated throughout the curriculum.

When I was asked to participate in the assessment of our department's gateway course, my public willingness was tempered by a great degree of private skepticism. An English professor since 1995, my years in the classroom have been both intellectually and personally rewarding, and I began the assessment process unconvinced of its capacity to account for the wonderful alchemy by which a carefully crafted syllabus, the engagement and spontaneity of in-class discussion, and individual reflection that takes place outside the classroom can profoundly alter a student's relationship to both text and context—the social, cultural, and theoretical frameworks that shape both the literature in question and its interpretation. I was apprehensive about how the established language and protocols of assessment would account for those flashes of comprehension in which a student's encounter with a text, perspective, or idea causes a shift in what the poet Audre Lorde calls "the quality of light" by which she sees a particular text or its themes. The flashes are integral to the postsecondary experience (36).

In retrospect, I realize that most of my misgivings arose from my concern about whether this process would transmit our department's commitment to a diverse curriculum that utilizes, alongside more mainstream and canonical works, the texts of women writers, queer writers, writers from working-class and poor backgrounds, and writers of color. And my concern was not only, or even primarily, related to the "Introduction to Literary Studies" course itself, but to those content-oriented surveys and upper-division seminars for which it serves as preparation. In the end, however, the "Introduction to Literary Studies" assessment did more than demonstrate for me the usefulness of meaningful, nuanced faculty-driven assessment and course revision. When I apply what I learned as a participant in this process to my experience as a professor of African American literature, I begin to understand how assessment can benefit the teaching of marginalized literature and how the assessment process can point to the possibility of both naming and measuring some of those crucial outcomes of undergraduate education to which my colleague and co-author alludes in her reference to "those questions of measuring the unmeasurable." Just as the "Introduction to Literary Studies" course itself serves as a gateway for Mills College undergraduates into the English major and into a fuller and richer engagement with critical analysis, so too has the "Introduction to Literary Studies" assessment become a gateway for me, into a new and compelling way of thinking about both the transformative nature of the literature classroom and the pedagogical demands that define my specialty area of African American literature. These two concerns intersect in ways that expose a new layer of pedagogical practices and intellectual outcomes to evaluate and explore. In considering how the assessment process and the field of US Black literature might shape and transform each other, I can

imagine a not-too-distant future in which the goals and criteria established for measuring student outcomes in African American and other marginalized literatures might suggest a means to name and measure those very qualities of magic or alchemy that are so fundamental to both students' and instructors' classroom encounters with the literary text. I am speaking, quite simply, of the ways that goals and assessment criteria developed to strengthen and enhance the teaching of identity-based literature fields may point to the very real possibility of transforming the teaching of minority literatures across the English curriculum.

When I think about how the alchemy of college teaching works in my own literature courses, my thoughts turn to those moments in which students' interactions with the text, with me, or with each other accomplish that which I often think about but fail to express or deliberately to plan for in my teaching: that is students' experience of the close examination of a text or a body of texts as precipitating a shift in their thinking about both the assigned classroom texts and the socio-political and cultural environment in which they (the students) read and understand those texts. I believe that it is possible and even essential to articulate much more specific goals and criteria for measuring a course's success in linking the students' analyses of assigned literary texts to their interrogation of social, economic, cultural, and political practices, beliefs, and assumptions that shape both the text itself and their engagement with it.

I will use the field of US Black literature, my own area of specialty, as my first example to tease out some of the possibilities I see for assessment as a tool. What might be gained by developing a set of criteria to measure not only students' comprehension of the breadth and diversity of US Black literature before the Harlem Renaissance, but also the impact of, for example, an African American literature survey course on students' understanding of identity categories and subject positions, relationship and settings above and beyond those depicted in the assigned readings? Consider, for example, that one of the most dramatic and effective moments in any of my African American literature classes takes place when I call students' attention to the ways that many US Black writers highlight the African American gaze.[6] I often guide the class through a close reading of a passage depicting the white subject as other, in effect facilitating my students' encounter with whiteness as objectified (and, at times, exotic) other, often for the first time in their lives. This decentering of whiteness can feel uncomfortably destabilizing for undergraduate and graduate students alike, across ethnicities.[7] And yet this is an essential discomfort. The displacement of whiteness is both a means for and a side-effect of writing Blackness into the center. This concept of decentering of whiteness and the accompanying practice of re-examining assigned readings in African American literature for the ways that their privileging of the Black gaze rearranges conventional (and racialized) conceptions of same versus other is, thus, critical to the teaching of US Black literature in the same way that a basic knowledge of the conventions of Elizabethan English is critical to the teaching of Shakespeare. The capacity to analyze an African American text in this manner must therefore be indicated in any department-wide or course-specific assessment efforts as a goal, with criteria that can be measured

to determine the success or failure of a department in accomplishing this goal.

My home institution of Mills College was one of twenty-eight California colleges and universities selected to be part of the James Irvine Campus Diversity Initiative (CDI).[8] Among the happy results of our participation in this initiative have been the development of a number of new courses on issues related to underrepresented racial and ethnic groups as well as the revamping of a number of more general courses (some at the introductory level) to make them inclusive of issues and texts related to underrepresented groups, a move which brings me back to the concept of decentering whiteness and its integral relationship to the teaching of African American literature. This diversification of the curriculum is a wonderful development, as it means that work by and related to the conditions, history, and experiences of people of color, women, and sexual minorities is fast becoming interwoven into our course offerings in ways that feel both pedagogically sound and intellectually true. But simply to include literary and artistic works and scholarship by people of color and other marginalized groups is not enough.

This revision and expansion of primary textual content must be accompanied by the incorporation of the scholarly terms and concepts, theoretical frameworks and analytical tools most effective at exposing and highlighting the counter-hegemonic themes and ideas often advanced in these bodies of work. Assessment could be a wonderful tool to ensure that students are exposed to and understand the major themes and techniques utilized in literature written by people of color, queer writers, and women, and are familiar with the goals of those scholarly modes of analysis developed in response to this primary literary work (theoretical lenses such as feminist theory, Black feminist theory, queer theory, Xicanisma, and others).

The pitfalls of teaching marginalized literatures without drawing on these modes of analysis are clear. To examine, for example, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* without the benefit of Chicana feminism's embrace of intersectionality and its related rejection of white supremacy leaves the text vulnerable to readings that would exoticize the writer's perspectives, positionality, and/or language(s).[9] Such a reading would overshadow the text's explicit challenge to whiteness and to English as normative standards. Assessment of student outcomes in courses that draw some of their readings from Chicana/o, queer, or other minority and women's literatures must include as a goal or set of goals (with measurement criteria) students' engagement with some of the ways that these bodies of work interrogate those power relations that have contributed to their marginalization.

I am, admittedly, only at the beginnings of my thinking about how assessment could serve to make concrete the ways that a more diversified syllabus enhances students' knowledge of literature; and at this point, when it comes to the specifics of how to define and measure students' engagement with writings by minorities and women, I have more questions than answers. In an American literature survey course, for example, would it not make sense to add as a goal of the course that *students be exposed to modes of literary analysis that take up the specific questions of power, aesthetics, and meaning raised in the literatures created by and about*

marginalized groups? Would the corresponding criteria for measurement require students to demonstrate an understanding of the critical issues and concepts addressed through such approaches? Our survey courses often make use of exams, which might provide the desired fit for ascertaining undergraduates' basic comprehension of the critical issues and terminology associated with different theoretical methods. Might, then, the course guidelines for the lower-division survey advocate exams with short answer definition questions as the tool of choice for measuring students' competency level around some of the key terms and themes addressed in minority, queer, and women's literatures?

At the upper-division level, goals and criteria that prioritize students' engagement with the counter-hegemonic frameworks, effects, and structural inversions of marginalized literatures should prioritize and measure familiarity with those critical approaches that bring these bodies of work into focus. If the lower-division surveys might set as an outcome students' exposure to the critical issues and terms that define these modes of inquiry, then would it not be reasonable to expect an advanced undergraduate English major to 1) demonstrate her understanding of the theoretical frameworks that explicate certain minority literatures' aesthetic and thematic distinctions; and 2) demonstrate appropriate application of the theoretical concept or method to a relevant literary text? At the upper-division level, the literary essay is the primary means by which faculty gain an understanding of their students' grasp of academic concepts and materials, and I can easily imagine as an outcome that *students demonstrate the ability to craft a thesis that is rooted in a minority-based theoretical framework*.

From the focus on student outcomes, my thinking moves to the question of course guidelines for faculty, a phenomenon whose embrace seems to be inversely related to its proscriptiveness. How detailed could such recommendations actually be? Would it be possible or appropriate, for example, to set as a goal that students in classes that feature texts transcribed from, or influenced by, the African American oral tradition would learn to apply Henry Louis Gates, Jr,'s concept of *signifyin(g)* to close readings of appropriate texts?[10] Could a department establish as a guideline for a course in women's literature that the course include at least two theoretical frameworks originated by and for women writers of color? Would it be overstepping a boundary to recommend that those frameworks be Black feminist thought and Xicanisma? What if, in the process of assessing an introductory-level queer literatures course, the evaluating faculty set as a guideline that instructors teach at least two texts and one theoretical framework addressing the critical issues and terms specific to lesbian literature, gay men's literature, and trans literature, respectively, as well as one queer non-white perspective?

Whatever its eventual role in addressing these issues and needs, assessment will be a critical part of ensuring that the strategies and theoretical approaches developed to interrogate the counter-hegemonic themes and goals of marginalized literatures become (and remain) an integral part of the English literary studies curriculum. Assessment could become a vital player in efforts to further integrate into the teaching of marginalized literatures those theoretical approaches and scholarly methods that highlight, rather than obscure or con-

tradict, their social justice aims. If we value as a student outcome the comprehension of the strategies by which queer texts challenge heteronormativity or an African American text challenges white supremacy, or a feminist text challenges patriarchy, then might we also value as an outcome students' exposure to those critical frameworks created to highlight, interrogate and critique the means by which those texts pursue these and other related goals? This last question points to the range of possible roles for assessment in English department efforts to integrate more fully diverse texts and approaches throughout the curriculum. I am excited about the potential of increased attention to the specific pedagogical demands of minority and women's texts to transform not only how we think about teaching literature, but how we think about evaluating and measuring the effectiveness of literature instruction.

Putting the Bogie to Bed: Our Assessment Coda
Kirsten T. Saxton and Ajuan Maria Mance

Our introductory course assessment had a ripple effect throughout the literature curriculum, and at the time of this writing, in the spring of 2010, we find ourselves at an exciting point in the growth and development of our major. With a firmer foundation (in the form of our revised gateway course), we are now looking toward the assessment and potential reconfiguration of our surveys and capstone. This time, though, the successes of the "Introduction to Literary Studies" assessment have replaced most of our skepticism and apprehension with curiosity, engagement, and, even traces of enthusiasm.

One of the bogies that haunted our attitudes toward the assessment mandate was our fear of the conversations that assessment would require within our department. Not only did we fear that agreement on goals and criteria would be impossible or reductive, we worried about the effect that the department's discussions about assessment might have on our views of one another and our ability to work together, that having to be so blunt about what we value and why would reveal untenable differences that would fracture our generally congenial relations. In fact, our assessment-driven discussions about our differences of opinion and our preferences, our particular specialties and styles have created a more intellectually exciting and cohesive department at the level of both curriculum and community. As this co-authored essay demonstrates, our work on assessment within the major has led not to a disruption of our collegiality and intellectual continuities but a deepening of them.

NOTES

1   I led the first assessment at our campus (our first-year composition course), and the first within our department (Introduction to Literature) and beginning in summer 2010, a third (our MA capstone).
2   Beyond English 10, our major requires three survey courses, Shakespeare or the Bible as Literature, six upper division topical/genre/period courses, and a senior thesis.

3   A "full-loop assessment" in this case means that we do the following steps: 1) set achievable goals for student learning; 2) define those goals in ways that are observable/measurable; 3) develop a rubric or criteria for measurement of the student achievement of these goals; 4) collect student work and measure its achievement of each of the goals; 5) analyze and reflect on the results; and 6) decide if we as a department need to change things in our programmatic structure (of the major, a "type" of course, such as surveys, introduction to literature, senior seminars, etc.) in order for students to achieve better the outcomes or goals we want. Make those changes. Rinse and repeat for a full loop.

4   See Appendix A for the rubric.

5   We added the *MLA Handbook* because of its comprehensive citation material and because we believed it a necessary resource for all of our majors throughout their completion of the degree.

6   My reference to the African American gaze is rooted in the more familiar theoretical concept of the male gaze and refers to the perspective from which the Black subject perceives. Feminist film theorists such as Laura Mulvey conceptualize the male gaze as one rooted in and manifesting a patriarchal power that locates and identifies the female as objectified other. African American writers frequently invert the asymmetrical power relations that define most US fiction (in which white characters engage the Black figure as the exotic) and offer a narrative rooted in the Black characters' experience of themselves as center and white individuals and identity categories as the non-normative other.

7   In my classes, the greatest resistance has come from those students of European descent whose experience of their own whiteness is conceptualized as the absence of race, and those African American students whose understanding of their own subjectivity is rooted in their belief that Blackness in the US is, by definition, incapable of marginalizing the identity and experiences of others.

8   Initiated in 2000, The James Irvine Campus Diversity Initiative was a six-year program of grants and other forms of support for diversity programming on the campuses of twenty-eight independent colleges throughout California.

9   Intersectionality, a core concept in US literature by women of color, is based in the notion that racial, ethnic, gender, class identities each intersect with and inform an individual's experience of his or her identity. An early text that exemplifies this idea is the slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slavegirl* (1861), by Harriet Jacobs, a nineteenth-century African American woman writer. The term intersectionality (also called multiple identities and interlocking oppressions) applies to the way that Jacobs' identity as a woman is inextricable from her identity as Black, with each of her identities shaping not only the way that she experiences the other, but also the way that others experience her (as simultaneously Black and woman). Add to her race and her sex the fact that, during the events she recounts in her narrative, she was also enslaved, and her experience of and visibility as both Black and a woman is further complicated by the

question of class. For further discussion and examples, see "A Black Feminist Statement," by the Combahee River Collective, in *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave*, edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith; and *Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, by Maxine Hong Kinston.

10 In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. uses the title of a traditional African American vernacular poem as the basis for his introduction of a literary theoretical concept, called "signifyin(g)." The terms refers to what Gates argues is a uniquely African American strategy of engaging past texts—stories, songs, rhymes, and other expressive forms—through imitation, amplification (of themes, characters and character types), and reversal.

APPENDIX A

English 10 Essay Assessment Guide

Overall Score	4. Accomplished (Shows skill; many strengths present)	3. Competent (On balance the strengths outweigh the weaknesses)	2. Developing (Strengths and need for revision are about equal)	1. Beginning (Need for revision outweighs strengths)
Thesis 30%	Clear and original thesis of appropriate scope	Clear but less original or refined thesis	Thesis present but needs work in clarity, originality, or scope	Thesis weak or inadequate: absent, unclear, or inappropriate in scope
Support 25%	Argument is well developed; paper provides appropriate, carefully analyzed supporting textual evidence	Argument is reasonably well developed and supported, but needs more carefully analyzed textual evidence	Evidence and/or analysis weak	Almost no appropriate evidence and/or analysis
Organization 25%	Consistently logical progression of ideas and use of logical transitions	Generally logical progression of ideas and generally logical transitions	Confusing progression as a whole and/or within paragraphs	Lack of logical progression of ideas and lack of transitions impede understanding
MLA 5%	Accurate use of MLA documentation	Minimal errors in MLA documentation	Significant errors in MLA documentation	Inadequate use of MLA documentation
Style 5%	Successful tone, varied sentence structures, clear and confident prose, and appropriate and accurate use of literary terms and concepts	Reasonably successful tone, varied sentence structures, clear prose	Less successful tone, less varied sentence structures, less clear prose	Tone, sentence structure, and prose style impede paper
Mechanics 10%	Essay demonstrates mastery of standard conventions of spelling, grammar, syntax, and punctuation	While there may be minor errors, the paper follows standard conventions of spelling, grammar, syntax, and punctuation	Frequent errors in spelling, grammar, syntax, and punctuation are distracting	Writing contains numerous errors of spelling, grammar, syntax, or punctuation that interfere with comprehension

Source: Mills College, Department of English, Summer 2009.

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A CAUTIONARY TALE ABOUT SYSTEM-WIDE ASSESSMENT IN THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK: WHY AND HOW FACULTY VOICES CAN AND MUST UNITE

PAT BELANOFF AND TINA GOOD

> Assessment is not evaluation, nor is it competition. Assessment is a process, first and foremost, for understanding and improving student learning.
>
> > SUNY Provost's Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

Fall 1995

On December 1, 1995, the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York (SUNY) presented the document "Rethinking SUNY" to the then-Governor of New York State, George E. Pataki. This document was created in response to a call from the New York State Legislature requesting a "multi-year, comprehensive, system-wide plan to increase cost efficiency" (qtd. in Board of Trustees of SUNY, "Rethinking SUNY" 1).[1] The preface notes that "as appointed overseers of the State University of New York, the Board of Trustees has a continuing responsibility to assess its use of the state's investment and to seek positive changes to ensure that we are delivering the most effective services to the taxpayers and the students of the State University of New York" (1). Within this context of "cost efficiency," one of the seven propositions put forth is the following: "Clearer academic standards and better means for measuring performance are central to increasing accountability" (2). What follows is a detailed and documented account of actions resulting from this 1995 document. The undercurrent here (as in almost all discussions of standardized assessments) is the tension between assessment to improve student learning and assessment for accountability.

Fall 1998

As a follow-up to "Rethinking SUNY," in December 1998, the Board of Trustees passed Resolution 98-241[2] mandating the establishment of a general education requirement for all students working toward a bachelor's degree at

all of its campuses. To meet this charge, the Provost created an Advisory Task Force on General Education whose membership included campus officers, faculty, and students. In the document, "Implementation Guidelines for State University of New York Baccalaureate Candidate General Educational Requirement," this Task Force mandated ten "knowledge and skill" areas and two "competencies" for all general education programs on all system campuses.[3] Furthermore, the Task Force required all campuses to include "assessment as a necessary component of their General Education implementation plans." To fulfill this requirement, campuses were mandated to:

- Review their entire General Education programs periodically to evaluate and strengthen performance;
- Establish assessment programs for the specified student learning outcomes;
- Derive evidence from the application of such assessment programs to show that the intended learning outcomes are being achieved; and
- Use the results of assessment programs to improve the quality and effectiveness of General Education programs.

Fall 1999

In response to the General Education Task Force's recommendations for general education assessment, the Provost established an Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes. This Task Force consisted of members from all segments of the university: campus presidents, chief academic officers, faculty, and students. As articulated in the "Report of the Provost's Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes and Guidelines for the Implementation of Campus-Based Assessment in the State University of New York," its charge was to

> examine and discuss the issues involved in implementing undergraduate student learning outcomes assessment today—specifically, in the context of a large and diverse university system such as the State University of New York. (3)

And to make recommendations regarding

> a process for assessing student learning outcomes and intellectual growth in General Education and the Major that will provide the faculty and academic leadership with an important and effective way of improving the quality of undergraduate education, and the University with a coherent and meaningful longitudinal data base with which to be accountable to its stakeholders. (4)

The Task Force made the assumption that assessment could work toward improving teaching and learning while simultaneously providing information

for purposes of accountability.

In order to achieve this dual mission, the Task Force recommended two levels of assessment:

> The SUNY Assessment Initiative should consist of both campus-based and University-wide strategies, with campus-based assessment focused primarily on program improvement and University-wide assessment used primarily to serve accountability and advocacy functions. (29)

What this statement came to mean was that individual campuses could develop and implement their own assessment plans for the twelve general education areas as specified by the Task Force and for the major. General education assessment plans were to be approved by another committee established by the Provost's office: the SUNY General Education Assessment Review (GEAR) committee. This committee was chosen to represent all levels of the SUNY system: university, college, and two-year institutions. Interestingly, the Task Force did not recommend university-wide assessment of academic majors, although it did not state the reason for this decision (3-4).

In addition, a second-level of assessment was to be instituted that would require SUNY institutions to implement some sort of assessment tool (such as a standardized test) to measure students' learning outcomes in all twelve general education areas for the purposes of comparison, accountability, and reporting.

Although the Task Force Report made it clear that there were to be two levels of assessment developed for the general education outcomes, this duality was not widely recognized by the faculty. Instead, the general belief was that campus-based assessment plans had to be developed, and as long as a campus developed these plans in good faith, there would be no mandate to implement a standardized university-wide assessment plan. In fact, it was understood that the development and implementation of the local plans would be a process, and as these plans were put into play, they would be honed to meet the needs of the faculty, students, administrators, and System Administration.

Summer 2003[4]

Many concerned faculty worked on developing plans without any added compensation. Quite a few campuses had already sent their proposed plans and schedules to the GEAR committee.[5] Members of this committee, working in small groups of three, examined these plans and either returned them to the campuses with suggestions for revision or sent them, with the committee's recommendation, to the Provost's office for final approval. Many campuses had even begun administering the plans and reporting results to System Administration. Therefore, when the Board of Trustees issued a resolution on June 17, 2003 ("Resolution on System-wide Assessment"), demanding university-wide and standardized assessment in the twelve general education areas, a great sense of shock and betrayal swept through SUNY's colleges and universities. Throughout the following year, faculty and administrators reeled from

the aftershocks of the Board's resolution. Faculty response, by way of their governance bodies, was swift and unequivocal.

SUNY's statewide faculty governance consists of two bodies. One body is made up of representatives from the state-operated colleges, that is, all the colleges and universities within the system except for the community colleges. This body is known as the University Faculty Senate (UFS). The other body is made up of representatives from all the community colleges within the system and is known as the Faculty Council of Community Colleges (FCCC).[6]

The FCCC was first to respond. On July 9, 2003, Kimberly Reiser, President of the FCCC, issued a letter of response in which she stated:

> I am writing on behalf of the faculty of the community colleges of the State University of New York to voice our determined opposition to the resolution adopted by the Board of Trustees on June 17, 2003 for the implementation of system-wide assessment. Our objection to this resolution is twofold. First, we are and have always been opposed to system-wide common metrics to assess learning; we believe they will circumvent the campus-based assessment process that the faculty and administrators of this University have worked so hard over the past two years to develop and implement. Second, we have grave concerns about the process by which this resolution was adopted.

Reiser went on to admonish the Board for failing to follow the by-laws governing the issuance of such resolutions and for abruptly ignoring negotiations already taking place by faculty and System Administration. She concluded with the request that the resolution be rescinded. The request was denied.

Fall 2003

On September 26, 2003, GEAR drafted a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between SUNY Faculty Governance and System Administration regarding the "Development and Pilot Process for Value-added Assessment." This memorandum, a result of the furor caused by the June 2003 resolution, attempted to define "value-added assessment" and called for the formation of the "Value-added Assessment Development Group (VADG)" whose charge was to develop

> the assessment instrument(s) to be used, the administrative procedures, issues related to student motivation, and the reporting protocol to be followed. The assessment should be made at two different points in time so as to permit the determination of the growth in learning that has occurred ("value-added") and should be accompanied by an assessment of the level of student engagement in academic activities that tends to result in higher levels of academic achievement.

This charge specifically mentions learning outcomes in "Mathematics, Basic Communication, Critical Thinking (Reasoning), Information Management, and the understanding of the methods scientists and social scientists use to explore phenomena." Interestingly, the list does not include humanities, the arts, or foreign language, although outcomes in these areas are a part of the original list of general education areas. Was this an oversight or deliberate? The reason for the omissions is not stated.

This MOU concluded with a listing of "faculty concerns." Among these concerns were the following:

- System-wide assessment will ultimately lead to inappropriate comparisons between institutions with vastly different missions.
- System-wide assessment will include the use of standardized tests or other common measures which will have the effect of forcing faculty to teach to the test. This would standardize our curricula and inhibit or remove the diversity which is a quality indicator for a system of higher education.
- Assessment ought to be campus-based, rather than System-wide. Further, campuses have in good faith developed campus-based assessment plans for general education. Now, before these plans have had the chance to be implemented, this additional layer of assessment is being urged. This sends the message that the campus-based plans were inappropriate or not rigorous enough.
- Presently, most campuses are having real difficulties as a result of the financial situation faced by New York State and the nation. System-wide assessment would represent one more unfunded mandate that would divert scarce resources from the faculty to another System mandate.

System Administration agreed to address the concerns that were listed in the MOU, although the specifics were left undefined. The MOU was distributed to the delegates of the Faculty Council and the Faculty Senate with the Chancellor's request that they endorse it. They did not.

In October 2003, the FCCC and the UFS passed resolutions opposing the Board's June 2003 resolution. On November 1, 2003, the Student Assembly passed a similar resolution. As a result of this dramatic opposition, the Chancellor, on November 5, 2003, "paused implementation" of the June 17, 2003, resolution, and invited faculty to lead the development of a revised assessment proposal. Additional support for the faculty position was forthcoming. On November 12, 2003, the Association of Presidents of Public Community Colleges (APPCC) drafted a letter to SUNY Chancellor Robert King arguing that university-wide assessment would compromise rather than promote academic quality and accountability. And, on November 19, 2003, the SUNY Community College Chief Academic Officers submitted their own letter to the Chancellor questioning the wisdom of adding one more layer of assessment to the several already in place. Objections in both of these letters focused

on inevitable "teaching to the test" and the resulting narrowing and lack of compatibility with the curriculum, plus the potential for politically injurious comparisons of campuses whose missions and student bodies differ in significant ways. By the beginning of December, 28 of the 30 community colleges within the state university system had drafted their own resolutions in support of the FCCC resolution opposing the implementation of a plan for system-wide assessment.

2004

In March 2004, a system-wide committee (made up of faculty, students, presidents, chief academic officers, and System Administration staff members) met to discuss university-wide assessment, which had been newly named "Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment" (Board of Trustees, "Resolution on Implementation"). The system-wide committee developed a proposal to be presented to the FCCC and UFS. Under the proposal, system-wide assessment would be limited to three of the original sets of outcomes: mathematics, critical thinking (reasoning), and basic communication-written, all of which were to be assessed by "nationally-normed" measures. The other nine outcomes could be assessed by strategies developed on individual campuses. Additionally, SUNY would pay for the "nationally-normed" measures such as the *Academic Profile* (AP), produced by Educational Testing Service (ETS), and the *Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency* (CAAP), produced by ACT. Thus, colleges and institutions would not have to bear the expense of these exams in order to meet SUNY mandates; however, we could only wonder: where was the realization that whatever money was spent essentially came from the same pot?

Two other options were also included, but not funded, in the resolution. The two alternatives to the national standardized tests were categorized as "SUNY-normed Measures." These measures were offered to those "campuses wishing to include SUNY-normed measures in lieu of nationally-normed measures." One of the following options could be selected:

1. A locally developed instrument that measures the learning outcomes in one or more of these three areas and that is demonstrated to correlate statistically (i.e., have *concurrent validity*) with nationally-normed measures….
2. A locally developed instrument that measures the learning outcomes in one or more of these three areas that is reviewed and approved by the GEAR Group. As part of this process, GEAR will rely on discipline-based panels of distinguished SUNY faculty that will develop standards and rubrics campuses may use to assess student performance. Campuses choosing to use their own standards and rubrics must demonstrate to GEAR that their standards and rubrics are essentially equivalent to those developed by the discipline-based panel.

And finally, there would no longer have to be two levels of assessment. "Assessment for Improvement" and "Assessment for Accountability" could now be

conflated into one assessment process. That there were no "nationally-normed" measures" for writing and critical thinking that could be mapped to the SUNY learning outcomes seemed not to be a factor in the establishment of these options.

It was the two proposed alternatives to "nationally-normed" measures that the FCCC focused on when they proposed a modified resolution on April 3, 2004 ("Resolution on Implementation of Strengthened Campus-based Assessment"). Specifically, the FCCC resolution, if implemented, would require System Administration to provide funding for the two alternative assessment approaches commensurate to what it would have had to pay for the implementation of the national standardized tests. In addition, the FCCC response required that the discipline-based panels have equal representation from the community colleges and the state-operated institutions. The resolution provided for the discipline-based panels to be selected by the SUNY governance bodies in collaboration with GEAR. And finally, the standards and rubrics developed by the discipline-based panels would have to be submitted to the governance bodies for their approval before they were used by GEAR to approve locally developed instruments. In other words, the FCCC agreed to the compromise if adequate funding was provided for campuses to resist standardized measures and if they had significant input and control over the creation and implementation of those assessment measures. The Faculty Senate endorsed the FCCC resolution that same month and the resolution was sent to the Chancellor.

In June of 2004, the Board issued a new resolution adopting the compromises specified by the FCCC and UFS resolutions. A victory appeared to have been won, but it would only be a real victory if the two alternatives to the standardized testing were made viable. In order to create this viability, GEAR—in consultation with the FCCC and the UFS—established three discipline-based panels: one for critical thinking, one for mathematics, and one for basic communication-written. Each of these committees was charged to create an assessment instrument that could serve as the template for a state-normed assessment process. Members of these committees represented (again) all divisions of the state system.

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Once the three discipline-based panels had completed their work and System Administration had conferred with nationally recognized testing organizations, those in charge of assessment at the provostial level announced that they planned to organize a conference at which representatives of ETS and ACT would be invited to come and present the possibilities currently available through their organizations for conducting these assessments. Both groups also indicated that they would present alternatives they could develop that would satisfy the mandate now in effect. Through our positions as officers of the SUNY Council on Writing (Pat was President; Tina was Secretary), we protested the absence of any voice that could contribute the ideas and strategies for valid and reliable assessment of writing that had been developed by the discipline of composition and rhetoric over the

years. We were told that there was no money to pay for any presenters. ETS and ACT were, of course, coming free of charge. The SUNY Council on Writing (affectionately known as SUNYCOW) agreed to contribute money toward the honorarium of a composition scholar. We were gratified that Kathleen Yancey[7] was then invited and attended the conference.

At the SUNY general education assessment conference, held in Syracuse on April 27-28, 2005, each of the discipline-wide committees presented the rubrics that it had developed and that campuses could use in lieu of standardized tests. The Writing Discipline Committee, composed as it was of quite a few members who already knew one another through SUNYCOW, had worked intensely, meeting once in person and then finishing its document via email.[8] When our results were presented to the group at the conference, there were almost no objections raised. The rubrics were praised by almost everyone present. (We have included these rubrics in an appendix.) When, however, the mathematics rubrics and the critical thinking rubrics[9] were presented by the respective committees in these areas, wide disagreement and objections were voiced by those attending.[10] We concluded that the near unanimous acceptance of the writing rubric was basically a product of the fact that so many of us in the state came together at regular intervals at conferences of SUNY-COW and had established a conversation about assessment that spanned many years. Those of us on the committee who shaped the rubric had the advantage of all those conversations.

In addition, representatives of both ACT and ETS presented sample questions that could become a part of new tests each group was proposing. The inadequacy of most of the sample items presented to assess the writing outcomes was immediately apparent to almost all attendees, even those not directly concerned with this particular general-education area.[11] From our point of view, we felt as though we had created a set of rubrics that most campuses would accept in lieu of a standardized test. And, indeed, a substantial majority of campuses used our rubrics.

After 2006: Basic Communication Assessment

SUNY defines college writing mainly as argument-centered. Note the SUNY outcomes for basic written communication:

- Produce coherent texts within common college-level written forms;
- Demonstrate the ability to revise and improve such texts;
- Research a topic, develop an argument, and organize supporting details.[12] (Provost's Advisory Task Force on General Education)

And because the infused competency of critical thinking (reasoning) is also commonly being assessed through written communication, the following critical thinking outcomes further emphasize the link between college writing and argument:

- Identify, analyze, and evaluate arguments as they occur in their own or other's work; and
- Develop well-reasoned arguments. (Provost's Advisory Task Force on General Education)

These outcomes, with the exception of the outcome relative to revision, do not reflect the developing composition theories of the past two decades, but rather resort to the forms prescribed by current-traditional rhetoric which have ruled the teaching of writing in American institutions for over a hundred years—the same forms that ETS and ACT have successfully argued that they can, in fact, measure with an acceptable degree of accuracy.[13] In order to provide a means of some resistance to these outcomes and to bring into the conversation nationally created documents, the Writing Discipline Committee prefaced its report with assessment and outcomes statements made by the Council of Writing Program Administrators[14] and the Conference on College Composition and Communication. It seems quite relevant to us that, if campuses are to be held to "national standards" for the assessment of writing, these should all be informed by policy statements developed and approved by national organizations within the discipline of writing. As a result of the wide distribution of the Writing Discipline Committee report, we have been able to begin informing the academy of current composition theories and methodologies and why standardized testing cannot be considered a valid measure of writing ability.

While our Writing Discipline Committee was debating and collaboratively constructing rubrics, members of the GEAR committee began looking at available tests for assessing research writing. They were not able to locate any serviceable standardized research test that had been nationally normed. As a consequence, the research outcome and the rubric that the Writing Discipline Committee had crafted to assess it were removed from Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment. Campuses were now free to design their own assessment for the research outcome.[15]

What is perhaps the most significant element of the move toward strengthened campus-based assessment was that it brought scholars from a variety of colleges and universities together to discuss the teaching and learning of writing and how those ideas might best be articulated to those outside the discipline. During the 2006-2007 academic year, several centrally located workshops were organized by the Provost's office and GEAR. Campus response to this invitation was overwhelming, with more than 350 faculty and staff registering to attend. At each one of these workshops, the workshop leaders were either GEAR members or members of one of the discipline-area committees (writing, mathematics, and critical thinking). Those of us conducting the workshops on the writing rubric brought sample papers that we had, as a group, scored against our rubric and asked those present to go through the same process we had gone through: reading the papers for each set of the writing outcomes and scoring them accordingly.[16] We came away with the sense that some faculty at least were beginning to understand how they could "own" the rubrics and even tweak them a bit to serve the needs of their own campus. An

evaluation conducted by GEAR supported our initial reaction that these work-shops helped faculty see the value of their assessments as primarily a prod to greater interaction among themselves about all aspects of the teaching of writ-ing: assignments, commenting, peer groups, revision, and grading.[17] Furthermore, that we used mostly the same papers at workshops throughout the state gave us some sense that there was a fair degree of commonality from campus to campus, but also a need for recognition of differences between and among campuses. Finally, as workshop leaders, we could not avoid the conclu-sion that every campus interpreted the rubrics in the context of its own pro-grams and student body. That is, one campus did not read a given rubric exactly the same way as another campus. Those who love standardization may not like this truth, but, as humanities teachers, we know that such differences are a part of all reading. And this is as it should be. Further studies of the results (not yet in preparation) might reveal the degrees of commonality and difference among campuses and could lead to further collaboration among schools as a way of sharing and learning from each other's assessments.

The Humanities Rubrics and the Major

As members of English departments ourselves, we traced separately the his-tory of mandated assessment of the humanities and English studies. Assessments of both were mandated in the November 28, 2000 Provost's Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes, but neither of these areas was included in the strengthened campus-based assessment alterations of 2004 (that is, no requirement that some nationally standardized measurement be used was mandated). The humanities area, however, was still to be assessed at the campus level with the standardized outcome established and mandated by the Provost's Task Force on General Education for all campuses, which speci-fied that students are to

> demonstrate knowledge of the conventions and methods of at least one of the humanities in addition to those encompassed by other knowledge areas required by the General Education program.

There is no outcome specifically directed at literature; literature, therefore, is subsumed under the larger division of the humanities. In other words, a liter-ature course is required for an undergraduate degree within SUNY only inso-far as it fulfills a humanities requirement. A student can achieve an under-graduate degree within the SUNY system without ever taking a literature course unless the local institution requires a literature course within its own general education curriculum. Unlike written communication, literary study has lost its status as a defining tenet of an undergraduate degree within SUNY. It lies beyond the purposes of this essay to reflect on the fate of litera-ture studies in higher education; much is being written on this topic.[18] What we saw in our perusal of assessment in our state is that literature no longer has its own slot at many of our campuses. It has been subsumed in a variety of ways.

Observing this omission in the general education curriculum and failing to locate any real suggestions as to what the outcomes for an English major might be, we thought it would be worthwhile to examine how the individual SUNY colleges and universities were approaching assessment of the English major. Recommendations included in the year 2000 "Report of the Provost's Advisory Task Force for the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes" relative to assessment of the major specified that each campus assume responsibility for assessment of major fields and insure that such plans include the input of "faculty, students, professional staff, and administrators." Furthermore, such assessments should occur "every five to seven years" (25) (an obvious attempt to coordinate such assessment with the schedule of accreditation reviews). Campuses were to include in their final report to System Administration the

- Delineation of the programmatic goals and objectives for the Major, with an emphasis on the learning outcomes students should demonstrate as they progress through the program to completion;
- Description of the programmatic activities that are intended to accomplish these goals and objectives;
- Identification of the assessment criteria to be utilized in determining whether or not students are meeting the program's goals and objections; and,
- Description of the processes to be used in assessing the program, making changes, if suggested … and disseminating assessment results…. (23)

We thought we would find patterns of commonality and dispute surrounding the assessment of student learning within the English major which we could then present at the Modern Language Association (MLA) convention in December 2002. We hoped to continue a discussion as to what we in the discipline of English value in student learning in the broader forum of the MLA convention, and in so doing, find ways to articulate and validate those values through the use of assessment methodologies. What we discovered was an extraordinary silence.

Although the deadlines for assessment plan submissions had passed and, in fact, first-year reports were due, we noticed that there were very few assessment plans submitted for any major. Most institutions had simply submitted their intended cycle of assessment areas. There were no assessment plans for English majors beyond boiler-plate plans that could be applied to any major, nor were there any reported outcomes for the English major.

The first assessment cycles' outcomes reports due were for the 2001-2002 school year. Within this first cycle, we looked to see which colleges would be reporting on the English major. None of the research university centers chose to report on English in the first cycle. Seven colleges did not have an English major to assess. Instead English was subsumed within humanities, liberal arts or general studies majors. In addition, because the state of New York does not allow for an associate's degree in English at the community colleges, the major

that most often specifically included an English emphasis was the associate of arts degree in the liberal arts and sciences with a humanities or a humanities and social science emphasis.

Thus, instead of discovering assessment methodologies that would help us articulate the value(s) of the English major, we discovered instead a devaluing of literary study within SUNY. This does not mean that individual colleges do not require literature. In fact, about half of the community colleges do require at least one literature course for their liberal arts degree, whether it is an AA or an AS degree; however, the literature course is often cast as the second course within a composition sequence. Furthermore, assessments of a college education that do not include a separate category for literature or English studies inevitably contribute to the lessening of their relevance; this is always a result of "teaching to the test": what the test does not test tends not to be taught.

When we returned in June 2004 to examine the assessment plans and reports, we observed little change in the status of the files with regard to assessing the English major, although—as one might imagine from the discussion above—files were rife with writing assessment plans and reports. While it is likely that faculty involved with the English major had not begun to substantively participate in articulating outcomes, and that assessing those outcomes and reporting on those assessments was due to a lack of funding and of consequences, it is clear that English faculty and administrators may be complicit in their own silencing within SUNY because of their resistance to assessment efforts.

Although this chapter is not focused on the make-up of English departments, we (as faculty who teach both literature and writing) have often found ourselves wondering if English departments are wise to allow writing to become its own program outside the construct of the English department—as has happened at many institutions. The general public tends to think of English departments as venues for the teaching of writing; this connection, in turn, strengthens the role of English departments in the minds of many. Our question, then, to those who are considering this divorce: are you weakening your department by allowing it? In turn, as we have seen by the written communication outcomes stated above, writing is still being defined through current-traditional concepts despite the last forty years of composition theory and the last ten years of separating writing programs from English departments. Has this divide really elevated composition to a legitimate field of study in the academy or has it made it more vulnerable to the whims of administrators and faculty who have a very narrow view of what the teaching of writing should entail?

Interesting Alterations

From the outset, we expressed our fears that assessment results would become political and would, inevitably, be used to make comparisons between and among SUNY campuses. Our concerns met with little response whenever we voiced them. However, in fall 2004, Erika Rosenberg, a Gannett News Service reporter, requested an assessment presentation from SUNY. SUNY

prepared a notebook detailing the assessment process, GEAR, and diversity metrics. After the presentation, she requested the percentages of each outcome in each category (exceeding, meeting, approaching, not meeting) reported by each campus. The Chancellor denied the request stating that the data were not report cards. The reporter filed a request for information under FOIL (New York State's Freedom of Information Law) requesting the data. SUNY was forced to comply and the campuses provided their individual assessment data within the context of each different assessment tool used.

The response to the FOIL request was released at the SUNY Board of Trustees Academic Standards Committee meeting on January 10, 2005 with the trustees, faculty, and press present. At this point, it became clear to all involved that assessment reports could not be kept confidential. The inherent conflict between assessing for the improvement of student learning and assessing for the purpose of accountability became a reality. We do not wish to pursue other scenarios here but just to suggest, based on our experience, that those in charge at state levels ought to consider not the specific results from each campus, but instead, the specific plans each campus has for using its results to improve the learning of its students; that is a justifiable way to oversee a system. Of course, those of us on the GEAR group who were writing teachers with an understanding of audience long warned of potential misuse of data, but we were assured by system administrators that the reports could and would be kept confidential. When everyone had to acknowledge that this could not be the case, the entire SUNY assessment initiative was threatened. A Task Force on Assessment Reporting was formed, and in a memo dated July 25, 2006 from Patricia L. Francis, Assistant Provost for University Assessment and Academic Initiatives, two important alterations were made to the prior mandates.[19]

First, the guidelines for Strengthened Campus-based Assessment had required that campuses submit a report that included the percentages of students "exceeding, meeting, approaching, and not meeting the delineated learning outcomes" (Provost's Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes 16). The revised mandate eliminated that requirement, stating only that "campuses are still required to monitor the percentages of students" in each of these categories; however, these percentages are not to be sent to a central file in Albany (Francis). There is no doubt in our minds that this particular change was a product of a growing concern about detrimental comparisons between and among campuses, a fear that—as we have already mentioned more than once—had existed for some of us from the very outset of the whole process.

Second, original guidelines for assessment of the major had required that materials submitted include whatever reports had been composed by any external review team sent by accrediting/certifying organizations, plus the self-study document prepared by the major department for this outside review team, and the "Summary Report Form for Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes in the Major" (Francis). The revised mandate eliminated the last two items. In effect, assessments of the major have been equated with reports of outside

accreditation organizations. And in effect, all the state efforts directed at assessing majors have resulted in no change at all, so far as majors are concerned.

Advice

On the basis of our experience with the whole process, we offer the following advice and suggestions, mixed with precautions:

1. As the pressure grows at the national level for postsecondary assessment, it is imperative (in our minds, at least) that disciplinary organizations pre-empt the issue. National organizations such as the Modern Language Association, American Historical Association, American Philosophical Association, American Mathematics Society, and so forth, must create their own assessment committees primarily made up of classroom teachers. These committees need to design outcomes for their disciplines and develop assessment strategies. At present, there are already too many organizations focused on assessment as such, and these organizations are speaking out about what assessment at this level should be.[20] But where are the voices of those who teach and administer within disciplines? Their voices must be primary, not secondary. Once these groups have completed their task and received the *imprimatur* of their organizations, they will be prepared to speak up and offer their plans. They will also be available to confer with groups at the state level which are pressing for assessment.

2. As soon as there appears on the horizon any possibility of state-mandated assessment, faculty must unite.[21] Voices that speak for statewide groups rather than for individual campuses can be the most effective. In New York State, we were fortunate to have two faculty governance bodies with considerable influence and considerable experience dealing with SUNY administration. Consequently, their voices were heard. Subject area groups can also mount an effective voice as SUNYCOW did. Our group has a statewide conference every year; consequently, all of us know our counterparts at quite a few other campuses. Our prior conversations made our political activity much more effective and much easier to mount. Unfortunately, many disciplines do not have statewide groups that are able to react to local issues concerning assessment. Perhaps faculty governance groups and statewide discipline groups, wherever they do exist, should consider opening up more lines of communication with each other. Furthermore, if the advice we offer in (1) above were to be followed, national disciplinary assessment committees would be available for consultation and advice.

3. Once a state's governing body (whatever entity may have control over legislation involving higher education) begins to propose actual plans for initiating statewide assessment, concerned faculty groups usually have options: to sit on their hands or to participate (or insist on being included) in any forum that is scheduled by this body before it makes

any final decisions. Both of these possibilities come with dangers. If faculty participate in a scheduled forum and demonstrate intractability, the governing body may become even more convinced than it already is that faculty do not want the public to have any knowledge about whether their teaching is successful. Consequently, anyone who opts to speak at such a forum must be a consummate politician and study how to walk a very fine line between demonstrating a willingness to listen and an insistence upon expressing a perhaps contrary point of view. If faculty elect not to participate in a scheduled forum, they will need to be prepared to deal with undesirable legislation that they can, if they so choose, continue to ignore. However, resisting campuses, faculty, and students may face dire consequences in terms of accreditation, funding, transferability of credits, and negative press. The public today appears to have a love-hate relationship with higher education faculty. Parents want their children to have a college education, but are often negative about teaching successes and failures. Faculty can and should find ways to present a positive attitude toward assessment. The MLA itself can be helpful provided that whoever speaks for it shows an awareness of and a willingness to recognize the importance of well-conducted assessments, particularly at the campus level. Quite frankly, the indignant voices of individual faculty members often produce negative reactions. One of our purposes in this article is to present information that might lead faculty to be informed critics of any assessment plans presented to them by governing boards, deans, provosts, and presidents. Instead of indignant faculty voices, we need informed and critical voices.

4. The above brings us to a further suggestion. Postsecondary faculty desiring to resist, participate in, reconfigure, concede (even if reluctantly), or to voice their concerns about assessment need to join with K-12 groups in their state. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has local affiliates in all states, and NCTE and these local groups have a long history of reaction to testing mandates. Local-area MLA groups could also be called upon. State boards and legislatures often do not respond well to out-of-state contributions; however, the more localized groups can be helpful. State-level groups can consult with their national organizations for guidance, however, before making public statements.

5. Matters of funding need to be embedded in every single point of our advice. Those who negotiate with mandate-creating groups need to insist adamantly on adequate funding, constantly reminding legislatures and the public that faculty members have an obligation to assess students in their own classes, but no contractual obligation to assess the programs of which they are a part. Such work traditionally lies outside the responsibility of faculty. Since, however, faculty *must* be involved in designing outcomes and assessment, there needs to be extra compensation for this work that goes beyond their contractual

duties. Furthermore, legislative bodies and the public need to be constantly reminded that, if the information requested is so vital to decision-making and curricular change, it cannot be gathered by untrained personnel. Institutions and faculty need guidance and time; otherwise the enterprise turns into busy work done to fulfill the mandate only nominally. Assessment can be important and meaningful; it cannot be done cheaply.

To sum up the above five points: what is crucially important here is that groups of faculty within a given discipline come together to plan a response before governing bodies have a chance to construct plans that they then may become wedded to, plans that are not backed up by allocated funding. For humanities organizations such as the MLA, what is even more critical is that our voices be heard before some template of outcomes categories is constructed. Such early intervention may ward off the merging of literature into some large humanities category. We did not forestall that merger in New York State.

6. Once legislation has been passed and is in force, we recommend continued monitoring of it and continuous attempts to make changes in undesirable elements of the legislation. We were able to do that in New York State. Opponents to the legislation should not return to their individual corners, but should continue to press for change and continue to demonstrate that certain aspects of the mandated assessment are unworkable or inadequate. The statewide conference in which we participated and the subsequent workshops demonstrated to faculty that they can find ways to make mandated assessment suit their purposes.

7. Obviously, one of the most important issues to press continuously at all levels of decision-making is the composition of all committees created: each such committee must be more than 50% faculty.

8. For the sake of emphasis and because this chapter is mainly concerned with MLA matters, we repeat our recommendation in (1) above: the MLA must establish a panel of experts on assessment, particularly statewide assessment. Members of this panel could testify at statewide hearings, but more importantly, they could meet with concerned faculty on a state-by-state basis and offer advice, tactics, published statistics, and so forth. This panel needs to be composed primarily of classroom teachers who had had direct experience with various forms of mandated assessment. **Such a committee could**:

   - **help communicate** what we recognize as the biggest issue for a majority of postsecondary faculty in this country: resistance to what they believe-and rightly so perhaps-cannot be measured, namely, their effect on a given student in one class for one semester in comparison to another faculty person's effect on a different student in a different class at a different campus in one semester.

Any discussion of reasons for this statement would require another article.

- **help faculty better communicate** ongoing discussions about grading: a high percentage of faculty state that they are already assessing students by awarding grades.[22] The state's and public's reply to this argument is that no one seems to know what grades mean, particularly when grading across classes and institutions seems so variable. Anyone who has participated in grading sessions knows that this argument is not without validity. Equally, anyone who has participated in grading sessions knows how valuable they can be as a guide or corrective to one's own standards. None of this means that there is no agreement and an MLA committee of assessment experts could help us all understand this and explain it to outsiders. We know the many good reasons why mandated assessment comparing campuses and faculty is simply not possible.

- **help us communicate our main argument**: that assessment must be owned by faculty to be effective; for that to come about, faculty must be included in constructing the assessment so that it will be relevant to their own students and programs, which they know better than outsiders. Comparisons can only be valuable to a certain degree, for each campus has its own particular mission and its own student body. On the other hand, resistance to standardized tests and standardized assessments may well not work in today's climate.[23]

Perhaps this resistance continues because of the ever-present linkage between assessment and accountability, an awareness that assessment for improvement of student learning may not be the primary motivation behind national, state, and college assessment efforts. In fact, even the 2000-year report of the SUNY Provost's Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes did not make clear what motivated its creation. What could have been the reason for demanding such an extensive reconsideration of the country's largest higher education system? On the state level, some changes of note included the election of Republican Governor George Pataki in 1995. In addition, there were changes in the leadership of the state legislature. Of course, with the change in governorship came changes in SUNY's Board of Trustees. Also by the end of the 1990s, SUNY had a new chancellor and a new provost. This rather remarkable recasting of the administrators within New York and SUNY inevitably led to changes in economic policies and higher education philosophies.

Perhaps the most significant marker of these new economic policies and philosophies toward higher education is the document entitled "Rethinking SUNY" from which we quoted in the first paragraph of this article. The desire to provide high-quality education for all without wasteful expenses is *the* tension underlying all pedagogical, practical, and administrative decisions in

American higher education, and certainly this is evident within the SUNY system. A decade after the 1995 proclamation, the SUNY Board of Trustees moved beyond its mandates in an attempt to develop a system to determine the degree to which those mandates were succeeding. That goal, in turn, led to the succession of events and regulations detailed in this chapter.

To the American capitalist and democratic sensibility, which accepts compromise as inevitable, the struggle to provide high quality for less money must seem not only laudable, but commonsensical. As Gregg Primo Ventello noted in a recent article, "The official documentation of assessment is an attempt to quantify our work in a profit-oriented capitalist culture that knows no other way to measure success than by counting it" (59).[24] We in the humanities need constantly to make the argument to the public that our work cannot be quantified nor can it be reduced to some common denominator. But we need to make this argument with supporting details. Too often those who make this statement to public groups do it without supporting details. One of the tasks of an MLA committee might be to archive specific examples of classroom assignments and projects that complicate assessment.

The "Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature," produced by the MLA in 2009, notes rightly that "without literature, there is no in-depth understanding of narratives that lead to the discovery of other cultures in their specificities and diversity and to the understanding of other human beings in their similarities and differences" (2).[25] To us, this resonates with older validations of literature as a legitimate area of postsecondary education, validations that, within the discipline itself, have often been belittled. It is instructive that the discipline has returned to this earlier rationale after a period of high theory that often alienated outsiders through its seemingly abstruse and arcane vocabulary that, unfortunately, was usually not translated into language the public could understand. Had it been, the public might well have seen the value of the theories. Those theories, whether feminist, queer, postmodern, postcolonial, or deconstructionist, have enriched our classrooms in ways the public could understand if the language had been made more accessible. These theories, plus traditional close reading of texts, are the heart of any literature course. The humanities as a unit, say Pontuso and Thornton, do not exist

> merely to impart a body of knowledge, but to convey a way of thinking. Liberally educated students must be taught to analyze problems, evaluate data, critically appraise arguments and beliefs and, more importantly, weigh alternatives. In a sense the object of the liberal arts is to prepare young people to cope with problems and challenges that do not yet exist. (62)

The difficulties of assessing courses designed to accomplish this list of objectives are not specific to English departments. Other fields including the sciences have comparable, and equally difficult to assess, goals. But another complicating factor touches on the students themselves. All of us rightly teach

the students assigned to our classes, and we know that they arrive there from quite diverse backgrounds with quite diverse prior educational successes and failures. Our goal is to help each student move from where s/he is to a higher plane; that higher plane may be for some exactly where some of their classmates were at the beginning of the term. Nor can standardized assessments take into account the amount of effort students devote to a particular class, nor can it take into account the varied lives of our students: many of them have families, jobs, and outside commitments that eat into the time they would like to devote to our classes. Many of us have had students who simply wanted their "C," students who recognized that their commitments permitted them only limited time for our subject. All of these factors need to be understood by the public and, for the most part, they are not. We need venues and strategies for getting this message out beyond the confines of academia. And, finally, standardized assessment has the unfortunate consequence of setting a standard that is far too low for some of our brightest students.

One final caveat. Both of us believe that assessment is not going away. We can barricade the walls, but eventually that will not be productive. One of the recommendations made in the "Report to the Teagle Foundation" stated that a "constitutional" element of baccalaureate degree programs in English should be "empirical research to assess the successes and shortcomings of the program" (3). The report elaborates on this recommendation by recognizing that the "results of program changes need to be documented and evaluated empirically, through the adoption of outcome measurements" (3). We would like to know what the committee meant by "empirical research." The purpose of this committee was not to confront assessment, but it is instructive to note that "outcome measurements" crop up in the prose; we can only hope that there is follow-up on this issue.

A second concern arises when reading the "Report to the Teagle Foundation." In its introduction, the report notes that those who comprised the working committee for the report included "college presidents and deans, as well as distinguished members of the legal and medical professions and visiting consultants" (Executive Summary). We noticed immediately that this list did not include any member, or at least did not choose to label any member, as a classroom teacher. Perhaps this accounts for the report's almost total disregard for pedagogy. Granted this was not the focus of the group; nonetheless, any discussion of the value of a liberal arts education in today's world ought to refer to teaching in some way. We cannot emphasize strongly enough the connection between assessment and teaching and learning.

Observations

In our minds, there is no question that the once-intensive drive for assessment has been lagging in the past year. Why? Perhaps because of a change from a Republican majority in legislative bodies to a Democratic majority, though we would not attribute greater understanding of assessment issues to the latter. Perhaps from waning interest on the part of a new provost. Promised results have not been evident: transfer for students has not been easier, confi-

dentiality has been compromised, and none of the promised feedback to the submitted reports has come about, nor have visits by SUNY system administrators to individual campuses. The economic downturn is undoubtedly relevant. Funding has lagged far behind actual completion of assessment reports. For example, at SUNY Stony Brook, participants in the writing evaluation cycle received the promised compensation eight months after the evaluation was completed and only after continued nagging. At the time of this writing, the latest SUNY budget request includes only $300,000 for assessment. That's hardly enough. Perhaps initiatives, such as this assessment initiative, always have a natural life span, and organizations move to other projects, leaving former ones to drift and assume secondary importance.

Failures of this nature have led faculty to rethink the whole assessment project and suggest that the assessment procedures mandated by accreditation authorities—in our case, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education—are sufficiently rigorous. As a result of this resolution, increased accreditation standards for assessment, and financial pressures, a Provost's Advisory Group on the SUNY Assessment Initiative was convened and recommendations for streamlining assessment were issued in their September 2009 Report. These recommendations essentially undercut the Strengthened Campus-based Assessment mandate. This faculty resolution was followed up by a resolution on the part of the SUNY Board of Trustees essentially undercutting almost all prior assessment activity as detailed in this article.

The authors of this piece continue to believe that faculty (or, at least, writing faculty) learned much during this whole process. Could the money expended have been spent more effectively? We believe so, but that would have required the SUNY Board of Trustees to listen to us at the outset. One thing is certain, however: assessment will always be entangled with politics and economics.

Those who continue to assert that nationally standardized testing can tell us how well thousands of colleges and universities are performing their function are living some kind of myth. Can assessment at the campus and department level help us understand how well our programs are functioning? Yes. Can we learn something by comparing our results and assessment methods with other postsecondary institutions with similar goals and student bodies? Absolutely. But these assessments need to be designed, administered, and evaluated by those who are directly involved in teaching the skills being tested. Much is learned by establishing outcomes, creating methods for assessing those outcomes, and collaboratively scoring the results of any assessment. We believe that the methods for assessing writing in New York State achieved what we considered our first goal: working together as teachers to improve what happens in all of our classrooms. In whatever guise assessment crops up, nationally or locally, those of us who care about students need always to link assessment to pedagogy, that is, to improvement of the teaching and learning environment in the classroom. The link between accountability and assessment will always, for better or worse, be headlined by others. It is up to us to find ways to "own" outcomes and assessment and to stress always, in every venue, the interactions between collaborative assessment and improved learning.

Postscript

Since we completed this article, the assessment mandate for SUNY has almost completely reversed itself. In March 2010, the Board of Trustees rescinded the resolution that had established Strengthened Campus-based Assessment in June 2004 while claiming that SUNY "and its campuses have been at the forefront of assessment and quality assurance for over three decades, and have been a national model of best practice" (Zimpher). The major reason, and a valid one, given in this Resolution for the rescinding is that the "Middle States Commission on Higher Education and programmatic accrediting bodies have significantly increased in the rigor of their assessment standards in recent years in response to federal policy" (Zimpher). It is interesting to note here that the standards published by Middle States include the statement that "[w]hile the Commission expects institutions to assess student learning, it does not prescribe a specific approach or methodology" (qtd. in Zimpher). Further, the document recognizes that the requirement for assessment of the major essentially duplicated the work necessary for satisfaction of Middle States Accreditation. Consequently, that process now satisfies the SUNY requirement also. The resolution, in keeping with the Middle States policy as quoted above, also "permits each campus to develop assessment plans that are consistent with its mission and goals" (Zimpher). We, of course, argued for exactly this over ten years ago. The document claims that the Provost will consult with representative groups in order to create "an assessment advisory group," presumably to serve as a resource for SUNY assessment efforts of all kinds. To our knowledge, that has not yet occurred. And, finally, the document makes no change to the General Education outcomes that are mandated to set the parameters for individual campus assessments.

We surmise that the current economic recession that has hit SUNY hard, the appointment of a new Chancellor, a new interim Provost, a change in the composition of the Board of Trustees, and a new Chairman of that Board may well have engendered these changes. It is, of course, difficult to know what weight each of these changes carried. However, there is now an environment of growing respect for faculty and faculty governance in matters of curriculum and assessment; this encouraging change is demonstrated through increased collaboration between faculty and SUNY administration.

We would like to believe, and know we have the grounds to believe, that all of the work of all these committees at the state and individual campus levels was not a waste. All of us learned much by participating in these discussions, arguing, agreeing, disagreeing, coming to a degree of agreement anyway, and simply having the time to talk about assessment. Such talk has still been minimal on campuses. We can only hope it continues on individual campuses and between and among campuses; the groundwork for such interactions has been laid.

We hope too that our narrative will be useful to those in other states who may face or who are already facing the possibility of postsecondary statewide assessment. We believe that much can be learned from our experience, both negative and positive. But most of all, we hope our narrative will lead to continued thoughtful discussions of assessment and its role in education.

NOTES

1   The Charge to State University of New York (Chapter 82, Laws of 1995), § 135. Notwithstanding any provision of law to the contrary, the board of trustees of the state university of New York shall develop a multi-year, comprehensive, system-wide plan to increase cost-efficiency in the continuing pursuit of the highest quality and broadest possible access consistent with the state university mission (qtd. in "Rethinking SUNY" 12).

2   The entire text of the Board's resolution can be found in Appendix A of the SUNY Provost Advisory Task Force on General Education's document, "Implementation Guidelines for SUNY Baccalaureate Candidate General Education Requirement."

3   The "knowledge and skill" areas are mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, American history, western civilization, other world civilizations, humanities, the arts, foreign language, and basic communication. The "competency" areas are critical thinking (reasoning) and information management. Outcomes were created within each of the areas.

4   For a timeline of events, see Reiser, "University-wide Assessment Chronology."

5   The document outlining the responsibilities of the GEAR committee and the principles by which they approved or disapproved the assessment plans of individual campuses is available at <http://www.cortland.edu/GEAR/Gearprocess.html>.

6   The community colleges are within the SUNY system and receive state funding, but they have an additional county sponsorship as well as their own respective boards of trustees. They, therefore, operate under different funding procedures and policies than the state-operated campuses.

7   Kathleen Blake Yancey is Kellogg W. Hunt Professor of English and Director of the graduate program in Rhetoric and Composition at Florida State University. She is a Past President of both the National Council of Teachers of English and the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Currently, she is the editor of *College Composition and Communication*, the leading journal in the field.

8   The following were members of the Writing Discipline Committee: Chair: Pat Belanoff, Professor, English, Stony Brook University; Mili Clark, Director of Composition, SUNY Buffalo; Aniko V. Constantine, Distinguished Teaching Professor, English/Humanities, Alfred State College; Wayne Fulks, Assistant Professor, Liberal Arts, Sullivan County Community College; Jake Holden, Assistant Professor, English, Fulton-Montgomery Community College; P. Kathleen McCoy, Associate Professor of English, Adirondack Community College; Robert Moore,

Professor, English, SUNY Oswego; Maria Palmara, Assistant Professor and Chair, English, Modern Languages, and English as a Second Language, Hudson Valley Community College.

9 For a spirited discussion of "critical thinking" as an entity to be subjected to standardized testing, see Griffin, "The Assessment Impasse."

10 A summary account of the SUNY General Education conference is available at <http://www.cortland.edu/gear/gearconf2005.html>.

11 For example, one of the representatives posited the type of question his company might develop to assess revision. The example began with a short paragraph of four or five sentences. The instructions stated clearly that the paragraph was accurate as it stood. However, a part of one of the sentences was underlined. The multiple choices following the short paragraph presented alternate ways of completing the partially underlined sentence. The student was then to pick the answer that best fit in with the suggested change. The right answer was not to change the meaning of the original sentence and had to be syntactically and grammatically correct. Such an example, of course, makes a mockery of revision: the test maker revises half of the sentence and the student finishes that task. And, of course, revision always must begin with consideration of an entire written piece.

12 This outcome, "Research a topic, develop an argument, and organize supporting details" remains one of the outcomes to be assessed for written communication, but it is no longer a part of "Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment," that is, there is no longer a requirement that some form of "national standard" be applied.

13 For a more thorough discussion of "current-traditional rhetoric," see James A. Berlin, "Current-Traditional Rhetoric: Paradigm and Practice."

14 The Outcomes Statement can be found in Council of Writing Program Administrators' "WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition."

15 For the record, and with the hope that others might find them useful, we have included the research rubric in the Addendum with the other two rubrics

16 See SUNY GEAR, "Report of the Writing-Discipline Committee" for these rubrics in their entirety.

17 Electronic surveys conducted after the workshops revealed that participants generally viewed the workshops in a highly positive fashion. As just a few examples of the survey results:

- 78% of respondents indicated they were very satisfied or satisfied with the facilitator-led sessions with respect to their ability to use the rubrics.
- 71% of respondents indicated they were very satisfied or satisfied with the facilitator-led sessions with respect to their ability to teach others on their campus to use the rubrics.
- 86% of respondents indicated they were very satisfied or satisfied with the overall quality of the facilitator-led sessions.
- 86% of respondents indicated they were very satisfied or satisfied with the overall quality of the workshop.

18   William Chace notes that "while the study of English has become less popular among undergraduates, the study of business has risen to become the most popular major in the nation's colleges and universities…. Here is how the numbers have changed from 1970/71 to 2003/04 (the last academic year with available figures):

> English: from 7.6 percent of the majors to 3.9 percent
> Foreign languages and literatures: from 2.5 percent to 1/3 percent
> Philosophy and religious studies: from 0.9 percent to 0.7 percent
> History: from 18.5 percent to 10.7 percent
> Business: from 13.7 percent to 21.9 percent."

19   See Francis for a link to the memo, and "Assessment Reporting Task Force Recommendations" for an additional clarifying list. This last list, dated July 2006, was undoubtedly a product of the confusing back-and-forth between campuses and system administration because of changes and misunderstandings. It clarifies the mandates in effect at that time.

20   For information on the formation of new assessment-focused groups, see Jaschik, "Assessing Assessment."

21   Since completing this article, we have learned of a project undertaken by the Lumina Foundation for Education that seeks to create some degree of consistency in the granting of degrees in fields such as history, chemistry, and physics. Three states are participating in the project and will be working toward establishing outcomes within these major fields. The question they will be addressing is, as an example, "What should a graduate with a degree in history know and be able to do?" It appears that Lumina is not intent on enforcing outcomes, only in getting those in the same fields at different institutions to share and come up with guidelines. For more on the project, see Jaschik, "'Tuning' College Degrees."

22   There seems to be a good deal of confusion among faculty, administrators, and the public between what it means to "assess" and what it means to "evaluate." To see a discussion of how these two terms have evolved to indicate different processes within the field of outcomes assessment, see "Power and Agenda Setting in Writing Assessment" in *Assessment of Writing: Politics, Policies, Practices* by Edward White.

23   The strength of the opposing sides in this debate, to participate or ignore government calls for assessment, shows up in the comments to Scott Jaschik's article in *Inside Higher Ed*, "Assessing Assessment."

24   For an interesting discussion about how assessment threatens what faculty value in the classroom see Ventello, "The Assessment Edict and the Love of Teaching."

25   In 2006, the MLA responded to the Teagle Foundation's invitation to think about "the relationship between the goals and objectives of undergraduate concentrations in their disciplines and those of a liberal education" (qtd. in MLA 1).

APPENDIX A: BASIC COMMUNICATION OUTCOMES SUNY
Students will demonstrate their abilities to produce <u>coherent texts</u> within <u>common college</u> level forms

Exceeding:

Writer presents an easily identifiable, focused, original, and thought provoking controlling purpose or thesis. The paper moves coherently, logically, and even creatively from an engaging introduction to a well-demonstrated conclusion. Paragraphs fit within this structure coherently and present pertinent examples and evidence to support central and subsidiary ideas. Sentence structure displays sophistication and variety; transitions add to the logical development of the topic. The essay exhibits a solid command of word variety and a tone and diction appropriate for the subject and its implied audience. Mechanics (grammar, punctuation, spelling and documentation, if needed) are nearly flawless.

Meeting:

Writer presents an identifiable and focused controlling purpose or thesis. The paper moves coherently and logically from a satisfying introduction to a solid conclusion. Paragraphs fit within this structure and present examples and evidence to support the ideas presented. For the most part, sentences are well constructed and transitions are sound—though the sequence of ideas may occasionally be awkward. The essay exhibits some degree of control over the tone and diction appropriate for the subject and its implied audience. Mechanics (grammar, punctuation, spelling and documentation, if needed) are mostly accurate, and paragraph transitions are sound, but the sequence of ideas may occasionally be awkward.

Approaching:

Writer presents a wandering, vague, or unfocused controlling purpose or thesis. The paper moves awkwardly from a weak introduction to a conclusion that does not adequately represent the body of the paper. Basic paragraphing exists, but often fails to support or even recognize a central idea, and the use of evidence and examples is inadequate. Sentence and paragraph transitions are often unclear, awkward, indirect, and/or illogical. Tone and diction are often inconsistent and/or inappropriate for the subject and its implied audience. Mechanics (grammar, punctuation, spelling and documentation, if needed) are not well executed and may, at times, obscure meaning.

Not Meeting:

Writer fails to present a controlling purpose or thesis; consequently it is difficult to identify exactly what the thesis is. The essay moves from an unsatisfactory introductory paragraph to an ending that does not serve as a conclusion, thus conveying the sense that much of what has been presented is unresolved. Sentence structure is often awkward and transitions are ineffectual and/or abrupt or simply missing. Diction, tone, and word choice are not appropriate for the subject or for the implied audience. Mechanics (grammar, punctuation, spelling and documentation, if needed) disrupt reading and often obscure meaning.

Students will demonstrate the ability to revise and improve such texts.

Exceeding:

Writer demonstrates clear evidence of an ability to revise by altering content and approach, by reorganizing material, or by clarifying and strengthening the coherence of ideas. Alterations may include the addition of new material, the deletion of unhelpful material, the substitution of more relevant material for less relevant material, the strengthening of transitions, introductions, and conclusions, and the rewriting of individual sentences. The mechanics (grammar, punctuation, spelling and documentation, if needed) of the final revision are nearly flawless

Meeting:

Writer demonstrates the ability to revise by refining the content, sharpening the focus, and improving structure, clarity, and coherence. Refining content may include clearer presentation of evidence, shifting of emphasis to foreground the most relevant material, providing improved transitions that keep the focus evident, and reworking the introduction or conclusion as well as rewriting individual sentences. The mechanics (grammar, punctuation, spelling and documentation, if needed) are mostly accurate and rarely impede meaning.

Approaching:

Writer demonstrates a lack of ability to revise in any substantial way. Whatever revision has been done has not been sufficient to improve the content, focus, structure, clarity, and coherence of an earlier draft. Such revision may very well be limited to sections of the essay and demonstrate a lack of awareness of how even small changes can affect the entire paper. Mechanics (grammar, punctuation, spelling and documentation, if need-

ed) have either not improved significantly or appear to be the only focus of the revision.

Not Meeting:

Writer demonstrates a lack of ability to revise at the level of content of structure. Either changes do not improve these features or are focused almost solely on mechanics.

Students will research a topic, develop an argument, and organize supporting details.

Exceeding:

Writer indicates/presents a clearly evident, original, and sophisticated controlling purpose, responding creatively to the assignment prompt with evidence drawn from carefully selected sources, documented in accepted style. Conclusions are based on thoughtful integration of the students' own thinking and careful analysis of the outside sources. Mechanics (grammar, punctuation, and spelling) are nearly flawless.

Meeting:

Writer indicates/presents a clear controlling purpose, responding intelligently to the assignment prompt with evidence drawn from appropriately selected sources, documented in accepted style. Conclusions demonstrate the writer's conscious attempts to integrate his or her own thinking with an analysis of outside sources. Mechanics (grammar, punctuation, and spelling) are mostly accurate and rarely impede meaning.

Approaching:

Writer indicates/presents either a shifting or unclearly articulated purpose, perhaps failing to focus on the assignment prompt. Outside sources may be inappropriate to the topic, or information from sources may be presented without careful analysis, and it may be inadequately documented. The conclusions may demonstrate little evidence of the students' own thinking, presenting mainly a summary of the sources. Mechanics (grammar, punctuation, and spelling) are not well executed and may, at times, obscure meaning.

Not Meeting:

Writer indicates/presents little sense of a controlling purpose, failing to respond to the assignment prompt. There may be inadequate reference to outside sources, selected sources may show little apparent connection to

the assignment, or paraphrases may be unclear, quoted material may seem not to relate to the topic, and/or there may be significant problems with documentation. The paper may consist largely of quotations and paraphrases from sources with few connections between and among them. The conclusions may demonstrate no evidence of the students' own responses to the outside sources and may merely restate some of the ideas presented. Mechanics (grammar, punctuation, and spelling) disrupt reading and often obscure meaning.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Pat Belanoff is Professor *Emerita* of English at Stony Brook University, where she directed the writing program for many years and also taught medieval literature. She served as President of the SUNY Conference on Writing (an organization comprising all 64 units of SUNY), and was the Chair of the Committee that created the rubrics for the Assessment of Written Composition for the SUNY system.

Tina Good was elected President of the Faculty Council of Community Colleges in April 2008 and took office on July 1, 2009. She has been a member of the Faculty Council for six years and has served as its Secretary, Treasurer and Vice President. She was also the co-chair for the SUNY General Education Assessment Review (GEAR) Group and the SUNY Joint Committee for Transfer and Articulation. She served as the President of the Ammerman Campus Faculty Senate at Suffolk County Community College

for five years and has chaired the College's Curriculum Committee for ten years. She is Professor of English and the Faculty Coordinator for Assessment at Suffolk County Community College. She is also co-editor of *In Our Own Voice, Graduate Students Teach Writing* (Longman, 1999).

READING FOREIGN LITERATURE CRITICALLY: DEFINITIONS AND ASSESSMENT

JENNY BERGERON AND RUSSELL A. BERMAN

HEIGHTENED SCRUTINY OF HIGHER EDUCATION has become a fact of our national life. Both the education community and the public at large are raising questions regarding the fundamental rationale for higher education, the specification of learning goals, the evaluation of outcomes and, of course, the constant increase of costs. Higher education is being asked to justify itself and to reform, where appropriate. No one should imagine that this challenge will go away. On the contrary, the interrogation is likely only to grow sharper, and the need for college and university faculty to examine their teaching practices and their underlying assumptions will continue unabated. Yet rather than adopting a defensive posture or otherwise resisting these questions, higher education can face these challenges as an opportunity to rethink and to clarify learning goals and pedagogical strategies.

College learning in the United States has long been defined in terms of a mixture of general education and specialization in a major. Earlier debates frequently concerned the choice of subject matter, i.e., which texts should be taught in required general education or the extent to which majors should or could include preprofessional—rather than purely academic—learning. In today's context, however, the discussion has shifted away from specific material, i.e., the texts to be taught, to a specification of the skills or capacities which a college education should elicit in students. How can college curricula enhance student cognitive growth? And can we measure that growth in particular abilities in ways that can demonstrate the effectiveness of education?

In fact, the expectation that college students grow in intellectual maturity is hardly new, nor is the assumption that such maturity ought to be evidenced in certain abilities, notably writing, but also reading and, more broadly, in capacities for argument, judgment, and interpretation. Complaints that college students perform insufficiently in these terms are as old as college life. This is, however, not grounds to dismiss these concerns.[1] On the contrary, shifts in disciplinary self-understanding, research in teaching and learning, and more sophisticated understandings of assessment provide opportunities to rethink the alignment of pedagogy and goals.

This essay attempts to clarify learning goals with regard to a core component of college education—reading—specifically in relationship to foreign language and literature. We assume that reading literature in the original foreign language can contribute to student skills in reading in general, in cross-cultural hermeneutics, and in critical reading in particular. By critical reading we mean a higher-level engagement with the text that goes beyond effective understanding of the foreign language text. That is, it is more than literal translation, and it also surpasses a capacity to summarize or recount plot. Critical reading assumes those lower-level skills but also involves a capacity to evaluate the form and content of the text, to make appropriate comparisons to other texts, to draw on a repository of contextual knowledge, and to pose pertinent questions with regard to the meaning of the text and its implications. We assume that the abilities inherent in critical reading are valuable both because they allow the reader to engage with the literary text and because these skills contribute to an intellectual maturity that can transfer to other dimensions, both professional and avocational, of the student's life. Given that importance, however, it becomes all the more urgent to ask in a systematic fashion whether specific teaching strategies are succeeding in building these capacities.

The Critical Reading of Foreign Literature in American Higher Education

Teaching college students to read literary texts in a non-native language is a core component of traditional understandings of a liberal arts education. Foreign language faculty typically regard familiarity with major texts and an overview of literary history within specific national traditions as the defining features of a proper undergraduate curriculum for department majors. Readings of literary texts certainly define the agenda of graduate instruction, where the future teachers of undergraduates are trained, and an ability to read literature is the touchstone by which faculty in these fields are recruited, evaluated and promoted. Much is therefore at stake for the college learner in the project of reading literature, with the supplementary challenge of doing so in a non-native language.

Yet the literary fields rarely attempt to define *reading* (in contrast to decades of debates over definitions of literature).[2] In fact, the seeming familiarity of the goal of reading foreign literature is deceptive. A systematic clarification of its component parts remains elusive, a situation that is hardly conducive to meeting the contemporary challenges to higher education. Liberal arts educators need to be able to pose distinct questions: What is literature? What is reading? What cognitive capacities are necessary to engage with the "foreign" material of another culture? And how does "reading foreign literature" become specifically "critical reading"? Bringing these distinct inquiries into discussion with each other is crucial for the future vitality of college education.

Several variables overlap, yielding a complex challenge for the instructor who should pursue pedagogical strategies designed to enhance student learning along multiple axes simultaneously. Clarifying the problems in teaching

and learning would be important in any case; it is all the more so now, due to multiple pressures on this sector of liberal arts education: declining enrollments in some foreign languages traditionally regarded as commonly taught (French and German, but not Spanish); declining levels of L2 (second language) skills for students entering college, producing low enrollments in intermediate or advanced classes; preprofessional attitudes among college students and their parents, generating resistance toward liberal arts sectors not obviously linked to career prospects; economic pressures on institutions of higher education leading to greater scrutiny of low enrollment areas; and a general turn, in higher education and elsewhere, toward evidence of accountability and assessment. How does the project of teaching college students to read foreign literature fare in this environment?

To answer this question requires us to identify the separate cognitive elements that make up the reading of foreign literature in the context of a college education. The obvious gateway is, of course, basic familiarity with the target language, including grammar, syntax, idiomatic usages, and sufficient vocabulary. For the commonly taught languages, much of this should be acquired during the first-year course. At least in this sector of higher education, there are commonly accepted criteria for assessment, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL) standards. Nonetheless, instructors of higher level courses regularly encounter undergraduates who still face difficulties, particularly when—as is frequently the case in literary texts, but not only there by any means—language use becomes complicated. The point, however, is that teaching foreign literature is never surgically separated from teaching foreign language. The organizational model of language learning prior to literature reading, with those two tasks frequently assigned to different classes of teaching staff, is flawed, insofar as student language learning ought to continue in the advanced classes and instructors of those classes ought to recognize their own responsibility as language teachers as well as literature teachers. Instead of separating language and literature learning from each other, we need to develop a holistic sense of the student's learning development.[3]

A second dimension concerns the character of the complex linguistic texts themselves with which students are asked to engage. While designating those texts as "literature" appears conventional enough, even this entry point requires investigation. With the widespread reconsideration of the literary canon, both as part of methodological shifts in literary studies and as a function of the politicized "culture wars" of the 1980s and 1990s, the selection of texts utilized in the college curriculum has been modified.[4] While some of this involves shifting from one set of authors to another in order to develop more inclusive reading lists, e.g., by increasing the number of texts by women writers and minorities, this curricular reshaping has also included a reduction in the amount of course time dedicated to explicitly literary material, replaced—in the spirit of cultural studies—by other sorts of texts, including documents that might otherwise belong to disciplines such as history, philosophy, or politics. Indeed, such courses can also include reading journalistic accounts of

current events. This is not the place to reopen debates over the relative value of narrowly literary versus broadly cultural curricula. The point is that the reading of foreign literature, strictly understood, is one specific activity, distinguishable from other foreign language reading that might be included in the course of study for the college student in a "foreign literature" course.

Although we can distinguish literary reading from engagement with other linguistic texts (philosophical, historical, etc.), it is important to remember that the undergraduate student is probably less of a purist on this matter. On the contrary, the undergraduate with intermediate or advanced skills in L2 is likely to be as interested in the history, politics, and general culture of that language community as he or she may be in the literature. Indeed literature may not even be the primary interest of the major, who may have some broader affinity for the culture. This is worth noting, particularly because the faculty member, in contrast, typically has professional interests much more focused on literature, even though he or she is sure to also have considerable knowledge of the other cultural dimensions of the region. In other words, the professor of German literature, dedicated to specifically literary scholarship, is normally broadly familiar with German history and politics, topics probably of considerable interest to the student; an effective curriculum would build on that student interest by providing opportunities to engage in other, non-literary sorts of reading. The result can only be an enhancement of language skills, which additionally might well serve the faculty member's goal of engaging students more intensely with literary texts.

It is also worth noting that even within the specific terrain of strictly literary reading (despite the importance of other sorts of reading as vehicles to enhance the student's growth), there remains an element of tension between student learning needs and the literary or, more precisely, literary-historical orientation of the faculty instructor. It is important to identify this discrepancy in order to develop appropriate strategies to enhance student reading. Beyond introductory language acquisition courses, foreign language curricula in the commonly taught languages (and in English as well) are typically organized in terms of a literary-historical sequencing; departments structure undergraduate courses in order to provide foundational coverage of literary-historical development. Frequently, if not always, this coverage is provided through a series of chronologically organized courses. While such linear organization mirrors the understanding of the disciplinary study of the literary field, it largely ignores student learning needs. In other words, what frequently comes first in the course is the historically earliest material, which is not necessarily the sort of text which would best support student engagement with literature, a poor choice as a first step in a hypothetical scaffolding of increasingly challenging texts. Curricular planning with a learning goal of enhancing student reading skills would do well to organize the trajectory of courses in terms of student learning development rather than solely in terms of historical sequence. We need to recognize that the discipline's understanding of literary-historical development is not the same as the development of student learning; the challenge we face involves redesigning course structures—and the articulation of

courses across the major—in terms of student development and learning needs rather than retaining course organizations that reflect the disciplinary assumptions of the respective fields.

In this context, we can only begin to outline some of the relevant curricular choices. The traditional paradigm of curricular organization in literary fields—which still retain considerable credibility—involves an aspiration to historical coverage. For all of the innovation in canon expansion, a fundamental historicism remains in place: while the content of literary periods may have changed dramatically, the compulsion to cover each period—and typically in chronological sequence—tends to define the organization of instruction. What holds on the departmental level for curricular structures holds on the course level as well for each syllabus, structured to reflect the historicist dictates of research rather than the learning needs of students. What would the latter suggest? How might one restructure literary learning to emancipate the development of student reading skills from the presumed trajectory of (national) literary-historical patterns? It would mean giving primacy to the project of building student skills in reading (in its multiple dimensions: syntactic, interpretive, critical, etc.) and selecting as well as sequencing texts with pedagogical needs in mind, even at the risk of ignoring literary historical coverage (Barr and Tagg). It would mean moving from simpler to more complex texts and making selections specifically designed to teach particular reading skills rather than to cover a historical period. Not surprisingly, any such loosening of the constraints of historicism is likely to shift attention to various formal elements—stylistic range, rhetorical capacities, genre variation. The point of such a rediscovered formalism, however, would not be an insistence on aesthetic autonomy—as salutary as such an agenda might be—but the importance of focusing on reading skills and therefore on textual selections conducive to building these skills.

We have so far identified several frames around the critical literary reading of foreign literature: basic L2 acquisition, the competition between literary and non-literary texts, and the relationship of enhancing reading skills to the presentation of larger literary-historical narratives. One last dimension requires our attention, and that is the reading of foreign literature as a function of students' ability to read literature in their native language. Surely college students trying to read foreign language literature will have previously read literature in their own language; indeed students are very likely to have taken college-level courses in which literature has been taught and read. One must therefore factor in student's native-language literary reading abilities in order to develop an appropriate foreign literature pedagogy and to understand a further element of the assessment discussion: to what extent is the student's ability to read literature thoughtfully and critically a function of the literature instruction the student has previously received, typically from an English department curriculum or from general education courses? Ideally, foreign literature curricula would build intentionally on other courses that contribute to an enhancement of student reading ability and pursue a self-conscious articulation with other literature courses.

Reading foreign literature is linked to a student's versatility in reading native-language literature; reading foreign literature, however, adds another dimension—not simply the additional language barrier but the imperative to consider the cultural difference between the native culture and the cultural context of the text. For the student, engaging with the foreign literary text is also an encounter with another culture, a dimension which is never fully absent from reading a native-language text (which might come from another era or region), but this gap is much more pronounced when the student reads a foreign literary text in another language. The reading of foreign literature requires a cultural hermeneutics, the capacity of a student to recognize hypothetical cultural differences and to integrate them into his or her textual interpretation. This particular interpretative obligation constitutes a key element of the critical reading of foreign literature, which could be an explicit learning goal of the undergraduate major in the appropriate fields. Among the benefits of studying foreign literatures and cultures, the development of cross-cultural interpretive capacities surely figures as one with considerable practical ramifications.

Critical reading of foreign literature includes not only that cross-cultural perspective, but also the need to respond thoughtfully and interpretively to literary texts that are frequently richer and more polyvalent than the straightforward writing of journalism or the social sciences. Reading foreign literature is, in other words, both about reading literature and about reading a foreign tradition. Building student skills in these particular dimensions can be at odds with literary-historical or other theoretical paradigms. The goal of an undergraduate curriculum focused on learning needs would emphasize building reading skills, in particular reading foreign literature, rather than notions of literary-historical coverage or any other paradigm which would impose a theoretical constraint on the engagement with students. Thus reading skills are a core goal of liberal arts education that will serve students well; the critical reading of foreign-language original material builds this mental capacity in an especially salient way. Yet once we have identified the location and particular importance of critical reading as a goal for foreign literature departments, how can we assess our curriculum?

Assessing Critical Reading Skills

Understanding and articulating what students should be able to demonstrate as a result of instruction is the first step in assessing curriculum. For this to occur it is important to obtain consensus from faculty members in the program as to the specific behaviors that constitute mastery of critical reading. Paramount to this first step is making sure that relevant instruction is developed and provided so that students may attain these goals. This process presents faculty with the opportunity to ask whether conventional (and perhaps often unarticulated) assumptions regarding learning goals remain appropriate or whether they should be revised in light of changing circumstances, such as lower levels of foreign language preparation of entering college students, changes in second language acquisition strategies, or shifts in the general education environment where students may have developed their basic skills in reading literature.

For tasks like critical reading, devising or selecting assessments can be challenging because of the latent nature of the processes involved in constructing meaning from texts. Because reading behaviors such as comprehension are theoretical constructions, they must be inferred through other behaviors, usually secondary to the reading task itself, such as writing, responding to multiple choice questions or engaging in academic discourse about the meanings and interpretations of texts.

Because of the complexities associated with measuring an unobservable behavior such as critical reading, reading researchers in the humanities have looked to the works of measurement scholars to inform assessment practices. A similar approach should be followed for the foreign languages. Although frequently tests are selected based on their presumed objectivity, ease of administration, and scoring, good assessment begins with answering questions about how test results will be used. This is validity consideration.

According to Samuel Messick, "Validity is an integrated evaluative judgment of the degree to which empirical evidence and theoretical rationales support the adequacy and appropriateness of inferences of test score interpretation" (749). Validity is not a property of the test itself. A test may be valid for some intended purposes but not for others. This perspective places responsibility on the test consumer to understand the particular purposes of tests and their relative strengths and weaknesses. Almost any kind of information about what is being assessed can contribute evidence as to the meaningfulness of test score interpretation. Validity does not require any particular form of evidence; however, it does require justification that the evidence collected validates test use. In the realm of validity, considerations for curricular assessment of critical reading in a foreign language should include at minimum the evaluation of content knowledge and representativeness and construct validity.

A key issue in constructing or selecting an assessment task is setting up boundaries for the content domain of interest. An evaluation of content relevance should involve an appraisal of how well the assessment task provides a representative sample of what is emphasized in the program's curriculum. Understanding and articulating what students should be able to demonstrate as a result of instruction is the first step in assessing curriculum. Clearly stated learning objectives are a requirement for effective assessment. Operationalizing behaviors involves coming up with specifications and describing how students are expected to perform on a domain of critical reading tasks that the assessment is supposed to represent. This requires a thorough understanding of the program's content, identifying what is being taught and what domains are being emphasized or given priority in the curriculum. Learning objectives should be clear, realistic, connected to what is being emphasized in the curriculum, and guided by current learning theory and reading research (Linn and Gronlund).

In addition to content considerations, understanding exactly what an instrument is measuring is critically important. All assessments of critical reading will be no more than samples of behaviors that approximate critical reading in the foreign language. This poses the question of what we believe actual

critical reading behavior to be. While reading researchers have struggled with how to define critical reading and its components, measurement within this field seems to be focused on comprehension. Because of these complexities, serious concerns may arise when developing or selecting an instrument that may either fail to capture important aspects of the behavior to be measured or the chance that test performance possibly could be influenced by other behaviors irrelevant to the task. According to Linn and Gronlund, construct validation "is the process of determining the extent to which performance on an assessment can be interpreted in terms of one or more constructs" (83). Whenever selecting or developing an instrument to assess critical reading, careful consideration should be given to the relative strength and weakness of different assessments, including what they capture and what they fail to capture.

Assessment tasks used to evaluate foreign language critical reading have largely taken the form of traditional comprehension questions, requiring students to respond to items by either selecting a correct answer or by constructing their own responses in either a written format or verbally. Because of their flexibility, multiple choice tests are the most prevalent of the fixed response formats. They are easy to administer and to score and they measure comprehension behavior at the reading level only, as opposed to open response formats that require that the respondent be able to write. They are also more reliable due to their objective nature. However, these formats are limited in that they weigh heavily upon factual knowledge, often measure product instead of process, require a single correct answer, do not allow for the construction of knowledge (which is central to how cognition and learning theorists view reading), and can be susceptible to guessing if items are cue dependent or if item distracters are not at least as plausible to the respondent as the correct answer (Linn and Gronlund 200-02).

In contrast, constructed response tasks, such as essays, oral exams, and even tests of recall eliminate guessing and allow for more nuanced answers, which is more appropriate for measuring critical reading as students are free to interpret, construct, and relate ideas. However, results of such assessments are limited by student achievement in other skills, such as reading, speaking, and recall, and therefore deflect attention away from the skill under investigation—critical reading. Also, due to the subjective nature of these assessments, they are more time consuming to score and less reliable as rater inconsistency—due to lack of understanding of the scoring criteria—can limit the value of the results unless care is taken to develop standardized scoring procedures such as rubrics and rater training.

In between fixed response formats and complex assessments (such as the essay test) are short answer items like the cloze task, which requires students to provide one word substitutions for missing words in a text. Although these tasks require students to supply answers, which thus eliminates guessing, these tests have been criticized because they assess reading comprehension at the most basic level (i.e., at the sentence level instead of at a global level) (Shanahan et al. 229-55).

The weakness of the assessment procedures mentioned above do not limit

the utility of assessing student performance. More valid assessments will result with a better understanding of what critical reading actually is and will require the help of reading researchers and humanities scholars to define it components. For now, however, we must be mindful of the approaches we select, keeping in consideration how we are going to use and interpret results. This includes approaching assessment through a reliance upon multiple measures. When these cautions are taken, assessment can improve instruction, mold curriculum, and inform faculty about their teaching. Assessment can enhance student learning by clarifying learning goals and providing feedback to students about their progress so that they can be actively engaged in learning. When conceptualized in this way, assessment becomes part of the teaching and learning process.

In summary, improving student reading skills has long been an implicit goal of a college education. In the context of current challenges to higher education, it is urgent to develop effective rationales and descriptions of these skills as well as appropriate assessment strategies to measure them. Developments in education research can support liberal arts faculty in articulating learning goals and pursuing them effectively. This holds for foreign literature reading as much as for other parts of the liberal arts.

Clarifying liberal arts education success in foreign literature critical reading is crucial for several reasons. Most directly this process can provide feedback to foreign literature instructors and promote reflection on existing pedagogy and elicit change where appropriate. Since numbers of majors in all the foreign literature fields remain weak, improved quality of instruction can only prove salutary. In addition, however, critical reading of foreign literature entails a project that is networked in important ways with *desiderata* elsewhere in the humanities: reading non-foreign literature (typically the domain of departments of English), and non-literary reading which is central to other humanities fields, notably history. Each reading zone has its own challenges and peculiarities, but given the importance of reading, this discussion suggests the need for a cross-disciplinary strategy of undergraduate reading instruction. Rather than losing ourselves in territorial debates over who owns reading, humanists would be well advised to collaborate across traditional disciplinary and departmental divisions in order to promote the urgency of a reading agenda, even when such a program may challenge conventional but outdated pedagogical strategies in humanities departments.

Yet this project goes beyond the humanities majors, even if research suggests that humanists are more likely to advocate for building reading skills than scholars in other areas (where numeracy may have greater importance). The ability to read well—closely, thoughtfully and interpretively, which is to say, critically—is a fundamental capacity and a key element in the intellectual maturity that the public expects of students with a liberal arts education. College curricula should be able provide strong reading skills to all undergraduates, not only to humanities majors. Whether an enhanced reading pedagogy takes place in separate general education curricula or in transformed pedagogy across the curriculum or in both is a question that goes beyond the scope

of this paper and is in any case likely to be decided in different ways at different institutions. However a robust reading curriculum develops, we are certain that foreign language and literature instruction can play a crucial role in it, and for it to succeed, the complexity of assessing critical reading will have to be addressed.

NOTES

1   "Freshmen have never arrived at college with impressive writing skills. Even in the 1890s, when only a tiny, privileged minority went to college, a distinguished visiting committee concluded that 'about 25 percent of the students now admitted to Harvard are unable to write their mother-tongue with the ease and freedom absolutely necessary to enable them to proceed advantageously in any college course.' Since then, the problem has become more serious …" (Bok 82).

2   At stake is the tension between the study of literature (literary history, in particular) and the enhancement of literacy (reading skills). The seminal account of the problematic is Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. Cf., Russell A. Berman, *Fiction Sets You Free: Literature, Literacy and Western Culture*. The efforts to define (or to expand the definition of) literature are immense, cf., Jean-Paul Sartre, "*What is Literature?" and Other Essays* or David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* The conceptual gap between literature and reading corresponds to the distance between a curricular approach based on content and (historical) coverage, on the one hand, and student learning needs, on the other, i.e., ultimately the fault-line between, in traditional terms, research and teaching. The systematic undervaluation of teaching and learning reflects a literary-historicist bias that threatens to undermine the effectiveness of liberal arts humanities education.

3   Cf. Modern Language Association, "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changing World"; and responses to the MLA report in *The Role of Reading in Reconfiguring Foreign Languages Programs* in the journal *Reading in a Foreign Language*.

4   These debates over cultural values and their role in higher education generated extensive publications, including Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*; James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*; and Gerald Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*.

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BIOGRAPHIES

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THE COLLABORATIVE WORLD LANGUAGES DEPARTMENT: A TEAMWORK APPROACH TO ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

JOSÉ G. RICARDO-OSORIO

A RANKING OF EXCELLENCE (in the purest pedagogical sense) of any program at any institution of higher education should be closely connected with the learning that the students may attain. However, many specialized publications such as *US News & World Report* base the ranking of colleges and universities on their financial resources, their activities, and the scholarship production of their faculty. Nowadays, with the advent of the assessment movement and pressure from the government, policymakers, accrediting agencies, and stakeholders, higher education institutions have been forced to make a shift in their rhetoric of excellence. The foci of institutional excellence are now centered on student learning and the value added of a college education (Nusche 5).

Under this view, academic programs are feeling the impact of external scrutiny. Therefore, it will no longer be valid to say that an institution of higher education is academically outstanding if proof of student learning is not reported and/or the attainment of learning is not demonstrated. Many critics of the current higher education system question the real value of a college diploma if evidence of learning is not indicated through programmatic assessment plans. Notwithstanding, some faculty and administrators are resisting vehemently the idea of documenting student learning through such measures (Suskie 37). I witnessed this sentiment at the 2007 Philadelphia Modern Language Association (MLA) Delegates Assembly discussion on student learning outcomes assessment. Some attendees voiced their concerns as they view the assessment movement as an affront to academic freedom or as a hidden agenda of the government to legislate higher education. The reality is that the foreign language and literature profession is evolving and we need to embrace this change collectively.

In the twenty-first century, language and literature programs are to be more cohesive and faculty are to work together in assessing student learning outcomes (MLA 3). In response to this call for reform, the foreign language and literature professoriate must shift from the current individualistic/departmentalized *modus operandi* to a more collegial and collaborative work environ-

ment. As a unit, language and literature faculty must look into their pedagogical practices by positing the following questions:

- How effective are language/literature programs?
- How current are our programs?
- How do we know that our students learn what we teach them?
- Do we actually know if they are learning a second language and/or literature?
- How well are they learning?
- Are our graduates in foreign languages/literature fully prepared to join the workforce of the twenty-first century?

To obtain answers to these questions, a collective department assessment plan needs to be developed.

The assessment plan must be motivated by the natural inquisitive mind that we all possess (the same one that drives our scholarly interests). World languages departments should not let the five-year report or the accreditation reviews (and in some cases, professional organizations) dictate the implementation of an assessment plan. We are all familiar with the dean's letter in which we are told to create an assessment plan and/or submit results. Such demands should not be the *raison d'être* for student learning outcomes assessment. There is no reason to claim that our academic freedom is at stake if we only think of assessment when the administrators "turn on the assessment switch."

If world languages departments want to regain the relevance that they have lost (Holquist 6), a good start could be to take a closer look at their programs by examining student learning outcomes. At the end of the day, we will not get the recognition we deserve if we insist, stubbornly, on not demonstrating that our students do learn a second language and that our rigorous literature/culture courses do indeed prepare them to think critically. We all know the ancient African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." In the context of this discussion, the village is our language department and the children are our students. It goes without saying that assessment of student learning is a complex endeavor. But it is doable. All department constituencies must act as chief academic officers (CAOs) of their stakeholders (the students), and assessment of learning should be regarded as a means to provide progress reports to the stakeholders. The process of assessing students' progress must be faculty driven. To gain ownership of the assessment initiative, we should take into consideration the American Association of University Professors' (AAUP) guidelines regarding assessment:

> The faculty should have primary responsibility for establishing the criteria for assessment and the methods for implementing it. The assessment should focus on particular, institutionally determined goals and objectives, and the resulting data should be regarded as relevant primarily to that purpose. To ensure respect for diverse institutional missions, it is important that uniform

assessment procedures not be mandated across a statewide system for the purpose of comparing institutions within the system. The assessment process should employ methods adequate to the complexity and variety of student learning experiences, rather than rely on any single method of assessment. To prevent assessment itself from making instruction and curriculum rigid, and to ensure that assessment is responsive to changing needs, the instruments and procedures for conducting assessment should be regularly reviewed and appropriately revised by the faculty. (11)

In this essay, I will present information that could guide a coherent learning outcomes assessment plan for world languages and literature. Some of the recommendations outlined herein are already being implemented at many world languages departments. If that is the case, I invite you to share your experiences via the appropriate professional groups within the MLA (or any other professional organization).[2]

Culture of Assessment and Assessment Literacy

A culture of assessment and assessment literacy are integral parts of a successful student learning outcomes assessment plan. The National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (NCPI) considers that an institution truly has a culture of assessment if:

1. There is campus-wide support for student assessment.
2. The goals for student assessment are well-delineated.
3. There is a strong allocation of resources for student assessment.
4. The student assessment plan is part of the institutional assessment plan.
5. Academic affairs and student affairs constituencies are acting members of the student assessment plan.

We can say that there is a culture of assessment when all the participating constituencies embrace assessment (faculty buy-in is especially important) and foster its application for a programmatic improvement of student learning (Suskie 37). In a world languages department, the culture of assessment is defined by the attitudes and dispositions of faculty members towards evaluation of student progress. Thus, assessment is not regarded as an external imposition, but as an internal, self-initiated method to gauge the quality of learning. Language and literature faculty use assessment to delineate and implement curricular changes to improve student learning of the target language.

The culture of assessment goes in tandem with assessment literacy, that is, the knowledge base about assessment and data analysis that faculty may have. Assessment literacy is a "tool for analyzing and reflecting upon test data in order to make informed decisions about instructional practice and program design" (Boyles 18). For example, everyone assessing a section of a specific course should be able to interpret assessment results and draw conclusions about their curricular implications. As leaders, department chairs must spear-

head plans to promote the culture of assessment and assessment literacy. It could be a road block to assessment if the department chair is one of its biggest opponents or when the chair takes a back seat in the assessment planning because his or her expertise is in literature or linguistics and not in education. Reneé Waldinger suggests that a department chair "may initiate a plan, provide the resources for its development or promote it within the department as well as without …" (49). I have had conversations with many department chairs who do not seem to know what is going on in their departments regarding student assessment. While faculty with education degrees have a functional knowledge of assessment, many college faculty do not, and therefore, they have to learn this new skill (Suskie 39). However, a degree in education is not necessary to understand and implement student learning outcomes assessment. All that is needed is an open mind to see our educational mission under a different lens.

The culture of higher education tends to center around autonomy and individualism. To survive the winds of change currently facing academia, a more cooperative stance is necessary (Uchiyama and Radin 272). Thus, one of the objectives of creating a culture of assessment and becoming assessment literate is to focus faculty's attention on a common goal: student learning. This may help narrow the gap that exists between language and literature faculty, especially at research institutions with large programs. In a recent research study, Richard Donato and Frank Brooks reported that there are pedagogical discrepancies between language and literature courses (184). Language and literature faculty have different agendas. The former group wants their students to become proficient in the target language whereas the latter wants students to develop their capacity to read and think about literature. Literature courses do not incorporate language learning outcomes within their curriculum (197). If learning outcomes are set up individualistically, students may be exposed to a fragmented curriculum that may not lead to advanced language learning (196). We are all familiar with complaints from faculty regarding the poor linguistic skills of students in literature courses. Often times, this weak performance may be due to a poorly articulated language program. In literature courses, students are required to use both higher-order thinking and advanced language skills. Therefore, learning outcomes for novice and intermediate levels should introduce foundational linguistic skills to prepare students for advanced language and literature courses.

In the language/literature gap, there is also a hierarchy pertaining to teaching assignments that may affect the outcomes and/or assessment of student learning. At some institutions, adjuncts or teaching assistants (TAs) are charged with teaching language classes whereas tenured professors teach upper-level/literature courses. Again, if there is no communication between these two groups, learning outcomes assessments may be poorly aligned or even worse, badly defined. For instance, if lower-level courses emphasize the knowledge of grammar (usually assessed with multiple-choice tests) and middle- and upper-level courses take a dramatic shift to oral production and discourse analysis, students entering such courses will not fare well. Under such circumstances, any language proficiency will come to naught.

In a collaborative department, both language and literature faculty must work as a team when putting together and implementing a student learning assessment plan. The success of this work will lie in the ability to create a cohesive plan. It is important that adjuncts and TAs be included in the assessment initiative. Department chairs must establish working teams in which more experienced faculty mentor junior faculty. In addition, the culture of assessment and assessment literacy initiatives should be part of a faculty-driven professional development plan. Faculty are more receptive to undertake an assessment plan and gain ownership of it if they are given the opportunity to draft the plan and carry out its implementation following a timetable established by them (Khattri et al. 117). Therefore, an effort should be made for faculty to initiate, plan, implement, and evaluate any departmental assessment endeavors. The chair or the assessment coordinator should serve as a facilitator of the process.

It is important to identify the purpose of the assessment plan before undertaking a specific project. In general terms, an assessment plan may have different purposes: classroom assessment, course assessment, program assessment (see fig. 1). Whatever the purpose is, faculty ownership is advised. If the goal of the assessment plan is to gauge student learning after an instructional unit has been covered (classroom assessment), the assessment plan must be tied to goals (or standards) for language proficiency and literature stated by the department. Very few foreign languages departments at the undergraduate level are using the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* and the *Proficiency Guidelines* as frameworks to devise assessment for language proficiency (Ricardo-Osorio 599). In a successful plan, departmental teams need to decide whether to use the standards and guidelines proposed by ACTFL or to create their own. It goes without saying that the latter option is labor intensive. Thus, I advise departments to incorporate the ACTFL criteria.[2] It is also ideal to use some of the recommendations stated in the 2007 MLA Report, "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World."

When it comes to assessing only literature, more work might be required since learning outcomes for literature may be more difficult to devise. Efforts should be made to delineate specific standards for literature. To date, there are no established educational guidelines for the teaching and learning of literature, let alone its assessment. When I ask at professional conferences what the role of literature is within the curriculum or which learning outcomes the students must demonstrate, I get different answers. Even among students we have heard complaints about having to take many literature courses. Students do not understand the importance of literature in the liberal education curriculum (or we do not give them a clear notion). To address this lacuna, literature and language teachers must define specific learning outcomes and standards of proficiency for literature courses. The study of literature should not be devoted solely to upper-level courses. Literature should be introduced at intermediate levels as part of the cultures or connection standards established by ACTFL. Departments should set out clear criteria explaining the role of literature in
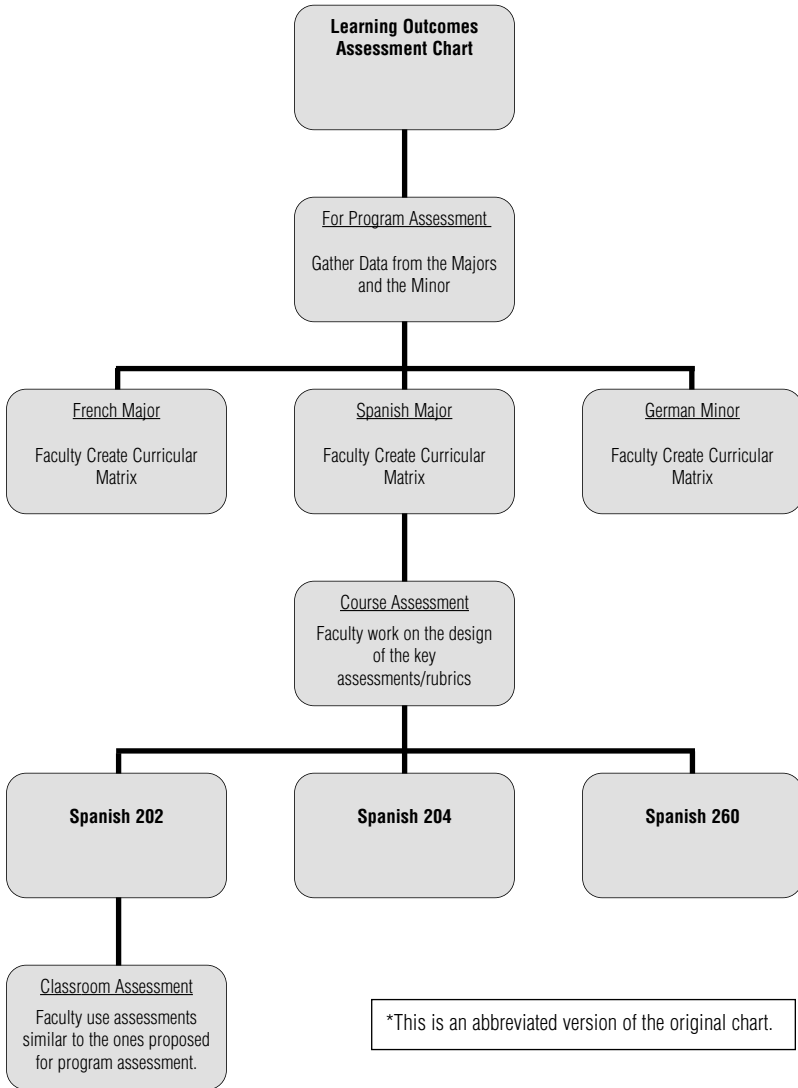
Fig. 1. Learning Outcomes Assessment Chart, Department of Modern Languages, Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania, date unknown.

the students' foreign language learning experience (MLA 2).

To see the connections among language and literature courses/sections within a program, a curricular matrix should be designed (see fig. 2). A curriculum matrix is an advance organizer that includes information on course offerings (in a sequential way), key learning outcomes and key assessments for each course (Allen 42). Information is presented in a table format. This way, faculty can see a layout of the curriculum and make the necessary adjustments in terms of assessments and/or student learning outcomes. Departments with

Course	Learning Outcomes	Key Assessments	Language Implications	Operational Information
SPN 202: Intermediate Conversation	a. Identify key information from authentic materials to be used in oral tasks. b. Provide and obtain information orally using appropriate communicative strategies. *Success is evident, if outcomes are performed as described in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for the intermediate-high level.	a. Integrated Performance Assessment (IPA). b. Role play of situations depicting simple transactions.	Students will interpret authentic material to obtain information. Then, they will exchange information with a partner. Finally, they will give a presentation based on the information obtained from the reading and the interaction with their partners.	Faculty teaching SPN 103, 202, and 204 should work together designing the key assessments and rubrics. Once the key assessment is ready, faculty teaching 202 will select a random sample from the student population taking 202. These students will take the assessment. This assessment will be given in the spring I (The start of the assessment cycle).
SPN 204: Ideas and Culture of the Spanish Speaking World	a. Identify key products and practices from the Spanish speaking world. b. Compare and contrast two products or practices from the Spanish speaking world.	a. Essay.	Students will write an essay in which they will analyze two products and/or practices from the Hispanic culture. In this essay, student will have to support their ideas with theory discussed in the course.	Faculty teaching SPN 202, 204 and 260 should work together designing the key assessment and rubric. Once the key assessment is ready. Faculty teaching 204 will select a random sample from the student population taking 204. These students will take the assessment. This assessment will be given in the fall I (2nd phase of the assessment cycle).
SPN 260: Intro to Literary Studies	a. Identify characteristics of literary texts.	a. Integrated Performance Assessment (IPA): Interpretive, Interpersonal and Presentational tasks.	Students will interpret three types of literary passages. Next, they will engage in conversations about their textual interpretations. Then they will write a summary highlighting their main characteristics.	Faculty teaching SPN 202, 206 and 313 should work together designing the key assessment and rubric. This assessment will be given in the spring II (3rd phase of the assessment cycle).
SPN 302: Advanced Spanish Conversation	a. Narrate events using main time frames.	a. In-house oral interview (OPI).	Students will sit for a thirty-minute oral interview. The interview will be recorded and then analyzed. The non-official interview must follow the protocols of an official OPI. Students are expected to be at the Advanced-Low level.	Faculty who have taken the ACTFL OPI workshop should volunteer to do the interview. This way all of the students taking SPN 302 can be tested. This assessment will be given in the fall II (4th phase of the assessment cycle).
SPN 309: Spanish Phonetics	a. Recognize specific sounds in spoken texts.	a. Interpretive listening activity.	N/A for this assessment cycle.	N/A for this assessment cycle.
SPN 312: Spanish Grammar	a. Use correct grammatical forms in written texts.	a. Presentational task: Replying to a blog entry.	N/A for this assessment cycle.	N/A for this assessment cycle.

Course	Learning Outcomes	Key Assessments	Language Implications	Operational Information
SPN 313: Advanced Composition and Stylistics	a. Express ideas logically and with some degree of sophistication in writing.	a. Presentational task: Opinion Essay.	N/A for this assessment cycle.	This assessment will be given in Spring 2011.
SPN 490: Selected Topics	a. Synthesize information from different sources. b. Establish connections among different fields to analyze literary texts. c. Demonstrate accurate control of the Spanish language both orally and in writing.	a. Final research paper. b. Oral defense of research paper.	Students will demonstrate that they have acquired the knowledge and the skills to be independent analysts of literary texts.	Data collected from students in the foreign language education program will be used to satisfy National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) accreditation. This assessment will be given in Fall 2011.

Fig. 2. Spanish (SPN) Major Curricular Matrix, Department of Modern Languages, Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania, 2009.

different language and literature programs should use a curricular matrix per program. Once the curricular matrix is devised, faculty should analyze it critically by answering the following questions:

- Does our current curriculum prepare students, from an early stage, for advanced language courses?
- Are the proposed learning outcomes realistic considering our course offerings?
- Are there learning gaps between language courses and literature courses in terms of language proficiency?
- Are our language and literature courses equally balanced in terms of offerings?
- Are the key assessments proposed for language courses congruent with the department goals?
- Is critical thinking properly embedded across the curriculum?

Collecting answers to these questions (and other questions that faculty deem important) and making adjustments accordingly are the first steps for program assessment regarding student learning.

For instance, in my department we created a curricular matrix similar to the one presented here. We worked in teams (by language and course level) to come up with key learning outcomes, key assessments, and the language implications of the assessment plan. The learning outcomes were based on two sources: the ACTFL *Proficiency Guidelines* (to assess language courses) and the notes from a departmental discussion on the ideal cognitive domains that the students should demonstrate in literature courses.

Our assessment has been implemented in cycles because it is impossible to assess everything at the same time. At present, we are assessing only the upper-level courses (i.e., Spanish 313, "Advanced Composition and Stylistics,"

and Spanish 360, "Master Pieces of Spanish Literature"). The team that worked on Spanish 360 also designed a rubric (see fig. 3) that will be used to assess the final research paper. As the assessment has not taken place at the time of this writing (it will be done in the fall of 2010), I cannot comment on the changes that will occur after the assessment data are collected and analyzed, but I would anticipate that some adjustments to the course (or to the curriculum) might take place, if the assessment results are not satisfactory.

I suggest a bottom-up approach when designing the assessment plan. This means that the department starts with setting up student learning outcomes that serve as program completion benchmarks for the minor, the major and general education. These benchmarks will establish the proficiency levels and the knowledge base that any undergraduate student should demonstrate before leaving the program. At this stage, exit key assessments (also called pre-graduation evaluations) should be determined. For example, if the department has indicated that students majoring in a foreign language should attain an advanced level of proficiency, a comprehensive oral assessment is in order (i.e., an ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview or OPI). If one of the learning outcomes for literature is that students demonstrate critical thinking by comparing and contrasting two literary texts, detailed guidelines for a research paper with an accompanying scoring rubric are to be devised. It is worth noting that an assessment plan to gauge program quality might be more cost effective if a random sample of students is drawn (Suskie 116). It will be a daunting endeavor to assess all of the students graduating from a foreign language program, especially at large institutions where foreign languages departments offer various languages.

Note in fig. 2 that my department chose a final research paper and an oral defense of the paper as the key assessment for students in Spanish 360. The rationale for the research paper as opposed to an essay (i.e., expository or argumentative) is that the former allows the students to apply more cognitive domains (i.e., bibliographical research). The same goes for the oral defense as opposed to the usual oral presentation. In an oral defense, the students have to back up their claims more thoroughly. A rubric (fig. 3) was created to evaluate the paper. Three criteria within the rubric were adopted from the ACTFL/ NCATE *Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers* since some students taking this course are in the teacher education program as well. This way, the assessment will serve to collect data for the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) accreditation purposes. At present, the team is working on the rubric to evaluate the oral defense. The use of both assessments will provide relevant data on the students' attainment of content knowledge and linguistic skills relevant to succeed in the 400-level courses.

When designing the program assessment plan, specific language should be included regarding the stages in which the plan will be carried out and the cycle in which the learning outcomes will be assessed. As alluded to earlier, it is preposterous to assess all of the learning outcomes in a single semester. My department's plan states, for example, that oral proficiency will be assessed in phase I (fall semester) and that writing skills will be assesed in phase II (spring

Criteria	Exceeds Expectations (3)	Meets Expectations (2)	Not There Yet (1)
Structure of the Paper	Thesis clearly given in the introduction, well developed and leading to a convincing conclusion.	Introduction, development and conclusion require some clarification.	Problems of organization. Expression of a sequence of ideas without a clear structure.
Research Content	Topic relevant and developed with details, descriptions and examples.	Topic developed with relevant information.	Topic poorly developed.
Use of Target Language in Written Presentational Communication Standard 1.1	Use of target language is on target when expressing ideas and concepts. Accurate and appropriate vocabulary with very few spelling errors. Very few grammatical errors. Meaning is always clear.	Use of target language has some inaccuracies, but communication is achieved. Appropriate vocabulary although somewhat limited with fairly frequent errors in usage and spelling. Some grammatical errors, although they do not interfere with meaning.	Use of target language is deficient. Extremely limited vocabulary with errors in usage of spelling. Writing not comprehensive to native speakers. Frequent grammatical errors that interfere with meaning.
Cultural Connections Standard 2.1	The paper presents a relevant example of the close relationship between the literary text (product) researched and a Spanish cultural perspective discussed in class. An explanation of the relationship between the literary text and a Spanish cultural practice was also included. The student provided several examples that illustrated these connections.	The paper presents a relevant example of the close relationship between the literary text (product) researched and a Spanish cultural perspective discussed in class. However, an explanation of the relationship between the literary text and a Spanish cultural practice was not included. If included, it was not strong. The student provided just one example that illustrated these connections.	The paper does not present a relevant example of the close relationship between the literary text (product) researched and a Spanish cultural perspective discussed in class. If presented, the example is not relevant. An explanation of the relationship between the literary text and a Spanish cultural practice was not included. The student did not provide an example that illustrated these connections.
Cross-Disciplinary Content Standard 2.3	The student drew upon other contexts to enrich his/her explication of the interrelationship among product, practices and perspectives. The student used researched information of Spanish history, geography, visual arts, music, and film to contextualize his/her ideas and/or examples.	The student drew upon other contexts to enrich his/her explication of the interrelationship among product, practices and perspectives. The student used very little researched information of Spanish history, geography, visual arts, music, and film to contextualize his/her ideas and/or examples.	The student failed to include other contexts to enrich his/her explication of the interrelationship among product, practices and perspectives. The student used some information of Spanish history, geography, visual arts, music, and film to contextualize his/her ideas and/or examples.

Fig. 3. SPN 490: Selected Topics (Final Research Paper), Department of Modern Languages, Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania, 2010.

semester). The number of phases will depend on the number of outcomes to be assessed.

An easier task is to assess student learning at the classroom level. To this end, faculty members must try and use the learning outcomes set up in the curricular matrix to devise specific course objectives. In addition, key assessments for the course must also mirror the assessments proposed in the matrix. That being said, faculty must have the freedom to design their own key assessments. Based on my experience, I recommend for faculty teaching different sections of the same course to work together in the design of a key assessment to be given at the end of the course. This key assessment could be an Integrated Performance Assessment (IPA). An IPA is an assessment procedure that

requires students to demonstrate language proficiency in interpretive communication, interpersonal communication and presentational communication around a single topic or theme (ACTFL, *Integrated Performance Assessment* 8). Thus, students will be exposed to the mechanics of the assessments and will be better prepared in the event of being chosen for a program assessment. Faculty must provide the learning outcomes and the rubrics for the key assessments to the students. The best way to do this is to add the information in the syllabus and discuss the assessment plan during class. If samples of previous assessments are available, these should be shared with the class. This way the students will have a clear picture of what is expected from them in terms of performance (or demonstration of learning). The same IPA principle can be implemented to design activities for the assessment of literature courses.

Once a key assessment has been administered and data have been collected, the assessment team must interpret and analyze these data. The results of the assessment (good or bad) should be used to improve the students' learning experience (Suskie 263). For instance, if data from the OPI show that only 20% of the students majoring in Spanish are obtaining an Advanced-Low proficiency rate and the department's assessment plan stated that at least 80% of students should attain Advanced-Low minimum, some major curricular overhaul has to be done. This was the case of the results yielded from my department's assessment. To sort out the problem, we encouraged the students to spend more time studying abroad and some class instruction was devoted to the acquisition of certain linguistic skills required for the advanced proficiency level. As the assessment results also suggested changes in teachers' pedagogy, the department's curricular team worked together and devised a comprehensive professional development plan. We organized two OPI workshops facilitated by ACTFL. As a result, two faculty members are undergoing training to become official OPI testers.

Just as positive results are celebrated collectively, so too must negative ones be tackled as a team (this is not the time for finger pointing). Faculty will be more receptive to making and implementing changes if their professional principles are not attacked or questioned.

In conclusion, assessment of student learning outcomes is a complex yet doable endeavor that requires an active participation and commitment from every single party within the department. A corollary of student learning outcomes assessment is the professional forum for discussion that ensues. Language and literature teachers (regardless of rank) will be talking about student learning and the curriculum. This time around, the assessment process will not be individual, but collective. Learning outcomes will not be delimited by a course. On the contrary, they will be framed along a learning continuum. The end goal of a team approach to assessing outcomes will be student learning.

NOTES

1   To further your knowledge base on departmental assessment initiatives, I recommend reading Linda Suskie's *Assessing Student Learning*.
2   For more information on the standards and the proficiency guidelines, visit the publications page on the ACTFL website <http://www.actfl.org>.

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BIOGRAPHY

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HOW TO CONSTRUCT A SIMPLE, SENSIBLE, USEFUL DEPARTMENTAL ASSESSMENT PROCESS

BARBARA E. WALVOORD

SO YOUR DEPARTMENT HAS BEEN TOLD it has to "do assessment." Faculty response may be welcoming or at least open-minded, but perhaps also resentful, resigned, or hostile. How should you respond? Or perhaps you *have* an assessment plan, but

- You have been told it is not good enough; *or*
- It is good enough for the assessment people, but seems stupid and useless to most department members; *or*
- It is useful, but the workload it generates is killing you.

I have taught literature and writing in English departments both large and small, public and private, for over thirty years. In the mid-1990s I began to speak and write about "assessment," because I was alarmed, as the national movement geared up, and I wanted to see this powerful new force turned for good, not harm, to higher education. By now I have consulted and led workshops at more than 400 institutions of higher education, on assessment, teaching and learning, or writing across the curriculum. I have written a book called *Assessment Clear and Simple.*

So in this essay, I want to integrate what I know about teaching literature with what I know about meeting requirements for assessment. I want to show departments how to construct an assessment system that is

- Consonant with the requirements of accreditation bodies, boards, legislatures, public education systems, or others who are requiring assessment;
- Consonant with the culture and values of the department;
- Useful to faculty and students;
- Manageable in terms of time, resources, expertise, effort, and work load;
- Respectful of appropriate faculty autonomy and academic freedom;
- *Not* used to punish faculty or make reappointment, promotion, or tenure decisions.

Beyond that, I want to address the question, "How might we assess our most ineffable goals—qualities of mind and heart that we most want the study of literature to nurture in our students?"

But first, the basics of assessment.

What Is Assessment?

Assessment is a national reform movement arising from public dissatisfaction with the perceived inability of undergraduate degree holders to read, write, and solve problems. The assumption is that higher education in America is broken, and that the way to fix it is to hold faculty and institutions responsible for assessing student learning. The assessment movement is exceptionally powerful because it has captured the accreditation process, which means the accreditors can make us do it. There are many questionable assumptions and potential dangers within the movement. When faculty are wary of assessment as a movement, I think they are doing their job.

But there is also good news. The accreditors define assessment as the systematic collection of information about student learning for the purpose of improving that learning. There is nothing necessarily demonic about that concept. When rightly done, assessment is actually a good idea. It's so good we can't not do it. Why would we spend so much time and energy trying to help students learn, and then not ask, "Is it working? Are our efforts paying off?" We have been doing assessment all along—not as well as we would wish, perhaps, and certainly not visibly enough for our constituents, but the essential task is to do assessment in a sensible way and then explain it clearly to those who need to know. And that sensible way, well explained, will suffice for the accreditors.

Most important, the accreditors leave to faculty the right to define their learning goals. So you can find your own ways to articulate the critical thinking, the aesthetic responsiveness, the reflection about meaning and values, the awe and self-loss, and the transforming experiences that you hope your students will take away. More about that later, when we get to stating learning goals.

Assessment and Grades

Meanwhile, a more prosaic question about assessment: the definition of assessment might lead you to say, "We give grades—isn't that assessment?" Yes it is. However, the purpose of grades is to answer the question, "How well did Mary or Juan do on this assignment/test/course?" The audience for grades is future employers or graduate school admissions committees who need to know how well that student did. The accreditors are asking the department or program to evaluate the learning of its students as a whole, to answer the question, "What can we as a department do to enhance our students' learning?" The department cannot answer that question simply by saying, "Majors graduated with an average GPA of 3.6 for courses in the major," or "Senior grades on an essay of literary analysis averaged a B+." Grades are too blunt an instrument for departmental assessment. They do not tell us what to work on.

Instead, we need a more fine-grained analysis that identifies strengths and weaknesses, the patterns of growth, or the emerging qualities we wish to nurture. Faculty conduct that type of analysis as we grade papers and exams, so we can use the grading *process* for assessment; we just have to push back down to the finer analysis the teacher has conducted, and we must draw conclusions, not about whether this student did well, but about how well the students did as a whole.

You might say, "Well, if students complete English 301, we know they have reached the goals, because that is what is required to pass the course." But again, course pass rates do not tell you what to work on. Instead, you need, as a department, to know the qualities of your students as a group.

Many good departments, in fact, conduct this kind of group analysis, at least informally. If department coffee pots could talk, they would report overhearing many statements that begin, "I wish our majors were better at…." Department meetings or curriculum revision committees often implement changes based on faculty perception of students' strengths and weaknesses. We need to ensure that these processes are strong, and we need to explain them to the accreditors in language that fits the accreditors' needs. I have seen many departments that were doing a better job of assessment than their written reports revealed.

The Three Steps of Assessment

Accreditors, no matter how many pages of guidelines they publish, require three steps of assessment:

1. Articulate goals for student learning in this format: at the end of this program, students will be able to….
2. Gather information about how well students are achieving the goals.
3. Use that information to inform decisions and actions.

Assessment for accreditors requires that you follow the three steps. It does *not* require that:

- You dumb down the curriculum, leave out your most important goals, or state only what is "measureable" in a narrow sense.
- You rely on "objective" or standardized tests.
- Everybody teach the same.
- The accreditor dictates your learning goals for students.
- You violate academic freedom.[1]
- You use assessment information in personnel decisions such as reappointment or tenure.

Step One: Articulate Goals for Learning

The first step is for the department to ask, "What do we want our students to be able to do when they finish our undergraduate major/associate's degree/doctoral program?" You do not need to worry about whether your

statements will be called "objectives" or "learning outcomes" or something else. Skip the jargon if you can. Just generate a list of things you want your students to be able to do. You will need a list of learning goals for each of your courses of study—the associate's degree, undergraduate major literature track, writing track, and each graduate degree.

The statement of the goals should begin with "The student will be able to…." This is very important for your audience of accreditors. The purpose of the assessment movement is to get institutions of higher education to move from reciting what *they* do, toward inquiring whether *students learn* anything. So do not include statements such as "The department will offer …" or "The student will be exposed to …" or "The student will complete an internship." In the following hypothetical example, drawn from a number of such statements I have seen, the department identifies program goals, not learning goals, even though the statements imply student learning.

Example: Inadequate Description of Learning Goals
The primary goals of the English program are to:

1. Teach effective writing;
2. Help students develop critical thinking and research skills;
3. Promote a broadened world view through the study of literature;
4. Foster collaborative learning.

The accreditor will think that the department doesn't know the difference between focusing on what the department will do and focusing on whether the student learns anything from what the department does. So here are the same items, turned into "students will" statements.

Example: Revised Learning Goals, Still Very Broad
Students will:

1. Write effectively for a variety of audiences and purposes;
2. Demonstrate critical thinking and research skills;
3. Broaden their world view;
4. Collaborate effectively with other learners.

The goals above are now stated as student learning, but the goals are still broad. They could belong to the sociology or management department as well as English.

Here are some goals (again hypothetical, but drawn from my actual work with departments) that specifically mention literature, but they, too, are broad because of their verbs.

Example: Learning Goals with Vague Verbs
Students will:

1. Understand the role of literature in expressing and reflecting all aspects of human experience;
2. Understand the concerns and perspectives unique to literary traditions and artists;
3. Discover how literature can assist in understanding ourselves and the world around us;
4. Discover the joy and fun of reading, writing and discussing literature.

The accreditor would probably not jump on the department for these goal statements, but at some point, when the department begins to plan how to assess these goals, it would need to make the goals more specific. So ask, "What are the critical thinking and research skills needed in English, or in a particular track of English such as literature or writing?" Then articulate those skills. Or ask, "What will students do that will suggest they are broadening their world view or understanding themselves and the world around them?"

Here is a hypothetical list of learning goals for undergraduate literature majors, again developed from a number of such goal statements that various departments have shared with me.

Example: Learning Goals with More Specific Language
By the end of the undergraduate literature-track major, students will be able to:

1. Describe and analyze major literary works, literary themes, and trends from English, American, and at least one non-Western literary tradition.
2. Identify and analyze the cultural, sociological, ideological, historical, linguistic, and other aspects of works of literature. Discuss the ways in which literature is a product of its time and culture, but also how literature can transcend or critique its culture or break new ground.
3. Analyze and critique literary works, orally, in writing, and in discussion with others, using at least two theoretical/critical approaches, and employing tools of literary-critical analysis.
4. Discuss the complex role of writer and reader/viewer in the mutual creation and enactment of literary work.
5. Make aesthetic judgments about literature and support them.
6. Find, employ, and cite sources effectively.
7. Follow ethical principles of the discipline for collaborating with others and for using sources.

Most departments stick with a list such as the one above that include aspects of what I would call "critical thinking," but not some of the more ineffable qualities. But here is where I want to play at the edges. What if we were

to state our most ineffable goals and attempt to get some indication of whether our students were achieving them? Let me be clear—no accreditor will ever jump on you for not stating the most ineffable goals. They'll be happy with "critical thinking" or "literary analysis." But maybe you won't be satisfied. Maybe it would be good for your department to remind itself of these goals, work to articulate them, and get some indication about whether students are achieving them. So let's explore what could happen.

Articulating the Goals for Achieving the Ineffable

First, you need a language for stating the ineffable. I want to cite here several sources for such a language. I'll do so at some length—despite the danger that readers might be impatient—because this language feeds my teaching soul. I love to read it again, and I think other literature teachers do, too.

Here is the language from the call for proposals for this book:

> [Students will] come to a new understanding of themselves, their world, and what might be a stake in the complex text before them. Such "sublime" experiences blur distinctions between subject and object; they can involve self-loss, awe and even humility in the face of that which is other and/or greater than the individual reader. Ideally, the study of literature draws students out of their quotidian concerns and into perspectives to which they would otherwise not have access, introducing them to forms of experience they would not otherwise encounter. (Heiland and Rosenthal)

Another wellspring from which we might draw language is the definition of "liberal learning" as shaped by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U):

> A truly liberal education is one that prepares us to live responsible, productive, and creative lives in a dramatically changing world. It is an education that fosters a well-grounded intellectual resilience, a disposition toward lifelong learning, and an acceptance of responsibility for the ethical consequences of our ideas and actions. Liberal education requires that we understand the foundations of knowledge and inquiry about nature, culture and society; that we master core skills of perception, analysis, and expression; that we cultivate a respect for truth; that we recognize the importance of historical and cultural context; and that we explore connections among formal learning, citizenship, and service to our communities…. Because liberal learning aims to free us from the constraints of ignorance, sectarianism, and myopia, it prizes curiosity and seeks to expand the boundaries of human knowledge. By its nature, therefore, liberal learning is global and pluralistic. It embraces the diversity of ideas and experiences that char-

acterize the social, natural, and intellectual world. To acknowledge such diversity in all its forms is both an intellectual commitment and a social responsibility, for nothing less will equip us to understand our world and to pursue fruitful lives. ("Statement")

Or use the language of a group of literary scholars under the aegis of the Modern Language Association which, supported by the Teagle Foundation, strove to articulate the relationship between literary study and the liberal arts:

Delving into other languages and learning to read complex literary texts rank among the most powerful means available for accomplishing [the] goals of liberal education and contributing to students' personal and intellectual development….

Literary scholars explore how storytelling plays essential roles in all kinds of human comprehension. As students of literature learn about literary structure and form and the meanings of departures from established forms, they are acquiring the basic building blocks of understanding. At the same time, literature supplies an imaginative context through which readers gain insight into politics, history, society, emotion, and the interior life. Thus close reading of literary texts develops important analytic and interpretive skills that play central roles in complex human enterprises. What accomplished readers do with stories found in books—inhabit them, accept them provisionally as real, act according to their rules, tolerate their ambiguities, see their events from multiple and contradictory points of view, experience their bliss—informs what they can do with stories in the world at large. (4)

Or turn to the language of "big questions" as employed by the Teagle Foundation and others such as the National Endowment for the Humanities' "Enduring Questions" grant program.

The Teagle Foundation has recently been probing into the big question of "Big Questions" in liberal education. We wanted to know whether a more direct engagement with the "Big Questions" would help invigorate students' liberal education…. We haven't tried to define those "Big Questions," but we gave, as examples, such questions as "Who am I? What am I going to do with my life? What are my values? Is there such a thing as evil? What does it mean to be human? How can I understand suffering and death? What obligations do I have to others? What makes work, or a life, meaningful and satisfying?" We were also curious about shifting student attitudes (including their interest in religion and spirituality), about issues of value and meaning, and power and morality, and their place in undergraduate experience today—in the curriculum and beyond. (Connor)

How might we draw from this language to shape learning goals for litera-ture majors? Here are two possibilities, submitted as possible additions to the seven goals listed earlier:

8. Students draw upon literature to contribute to their own search for meaning, their own engagement with the "big questions" of life and values—questions of life and death; good and evil; indi-vidual and society; power, transcendence, and virtue.
9. Students come to a new understanding of themselves, their world, and what might be at stake in the complex text before them. They dare to explore new ideas and literary experiences.

It's bold to state goals 8 and 9. It's not necessary for accreditation that you do so. You might not be able to get departmental agreement on any statement of such goals. But my point is that you *can* state these goals, and you *can* find ways to assess whether your students are reaching them. And doing so might be an incredibly rich and enlivening experience.

If the Department Cannot Agree on Goals

If the department cannot agree on a full set of goals, whether ordinary or ineffable, then generate a few goals you can agree on and move to Step Two—begin to collect information about how well students are meeting those goals. If disagreement or confusion about the goals is productive in helping the department clarify its mission and vision, then take the time to work through that discussion. But you should not let the department get bogged down in two years of bickering over the goals. In your report, you'll say, "The depart-ment has agreed on this partial set of learning goals for its current assessment process. Further goals will be generated later." The most important thing you can do, for yourselves and for the accreditors, is to show that you gathered some reasonable data and you acted on that information to make changes.

Step Two: Select Measures of Student Learning

Once you have a workable set of goals, you need to select what the assess-ment language calls "measures," but what you can conceptualize as "indica-tors" of student learning.

Direct and Indirect Measures

One piece of jargon I think useful is the distinction between "direct" and "indirect" measures. A direct measure occurs when the student does some-thing—writes a paper, takes an exam, participates in class discussion—and someone directly observes and evaluates that performance. Indirect is every-thing else. Indirect measures involve some leap of inference between the stu-dent's performance and the evaluation: for example, you ask students or alum-ni what they *thought* they learned, or you track their placement into jobs or graduate school. One assumes that students got the job or were admitted to graduate school because they had learned, but that is a leap of inference.

Indirect measures can be very useful, but you will want to have, and accreditors will urge, a mix of direct and indirect measures.

The Basic, No-Frills System

The most basic, no-frills system calls for:

- One direct measure. The department examines at least a sample of students' classroom work toward the end of their course of study. This can be done in two ways:
  - The faculty teaching courses that enroll significant numbers of seniors may report students' strengths and weaknesses, based on the faculty members' analysis of students' classroom work.
  - And/or a separate group of faculty may analyze a sample of senior student work to identify strengths and weaknesses.

(A later section of this chapter gives more detail about how classroom work can be brought to the department for analysis and action.)

- One indirect measure. The department gathers information from students via a student survey or focus groups. You can ask these three questions:
  - For each learning goal, how well did you achieve this goal (very well, somewhat well, not very well, not at all)?
  - What aspects of the department's program, curriculum, courses, internships, or other activities in your major most helped you learn, and how did these things help (please be specific)?
  - What suggestions for improvement do you have in the department's program?

It is better to use two measures well than to proliferate measures you cannot use. Above all, do not list things in your reports that are not measures of learning for the program. For example, do not list the things you ask students to do (internship, senior research project) or assignments in a single course, *unless* the information about students' strengths and weaknesses is brought to the department or to a committee for program-level discussion and action.

Step Three: Use the Information for Improvement

I suggest that you hold one two-hour meeting each year, in which the department, or a relevant committee, examines whatever information you have about student learning in one of your programs—say the undergraduate major. If the data are incomplete or inadequate, hold the meeting anyway, and devote part of the meeting to discussing how to get better data.

By the end of the meeting, the department should identify one action item suggested by the data. For example, the data may suggest a number of

weaknesses in senior student work, but the department may choose to focus on one of them—helping students more effectively learn to employ more than one literary-critical lens or approach. Before the meeting ends, a person or small group is appointed to follow up. In the succeeding months, the department examines its curriculum to see where students are taught to use more than one literary-critical lens, where they are given practice and feedback, and where they develop the prerequisite skills they need.

Taking Action

Depending on what they find, departments will take action. The two most common actions are:

- Curricular change: for example, emphasizing a particular skill more fully in one or more courses, adding/dropping a course, changing prerequisites and requirements, or changing the sequence of courses.
- Faculty development: for example, a series of brownbag lunches for faculty to share how they help students recognize multiple literary-critical lenses, or how they encourage development of oral communication skills.

Details: Using Classroom Work for Departmental Assessment

For the direct measure, the department needs to look at a sample of student work, evaluate its strengths and weaknesses, and use that information for action at the department level. This is different from merely course-level grading of student papers, from which the individual course instructor can make improvements in how she or he teaches.

Begin with a sample of student work at the end of the course of study. Taking pre-post samples is more difficult than it sounds. It is better to start with an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of student work toward the end of the program, select something to work on, and then perhaps go back for further information about students' skills when they entered the program or when they completed the required American literature course.

If you have a capstone for the major and/or a thesis or exam for the master's degree and PhD, these become ideal sites for gathering samples of student work. If you have no capstone, or if your community college English department contributes to an associate's degree, you can take the work of students in two to three classes that enroll many or most of your students toward the end of their course of study. It is possible to take student work from a class that enrolls all levels, and extract only the work of seniors or students who have completed a specific number of credit hours, or students who have already taken a certain number of English courses.

This is *not* an exercise in judging a single teacher. Rather, select student work that encompasses skills and knowledge the students have developed throughout their course of study. The quality of this work is everyone's responsibility. The department works together as a team to address weaknesses and build on strengths.

Once you have a sample of student work, you need a way of analyzing it to identify strengths and weaknesses that the department can act on. There are two ways to get an analysis of students' strengths and weaknesses.

1. The instructor of the course conducts an analysis of students' strengths and weaknesses and reports to the department.
2. A group of department members analyzes a student work sample and reports to the department.

Either of these methods needs a set of criteria against which the instructor or the faculty readers can evaluate the student work. At minimum, the evaluators might work from a list of criteria related to the departmental learning goals. A more detailed mode of analysis uses a "rubric"—that is, a particular format for stating criteria and standards. In a rubric, the various traits of the work are evaluated separately, each with a scale from high-level work to low-level work. Fig. 1 is a rubric for literary-critical essays.

You'll see that it evaluates such qualities as complexity and originality. It deals intensively with critical thinking, as those skills appear in literary analysis. It would be sufficient for accreditation to use a rubric such as fig. 1 to evaluate a sample of senior student literary-critical essays. However, in these essays, students may or may not achieve some of the more ineffable qualities stated in goals 8 and 9 above.

So let's ratchet up a notch, and talk about how to collect student work that might indicate whether students are achieving the ineffable goals expressed in 8 and 9. Let's begin by looking at some student work that I believe exhibits some of the qualities expressed in Goals 8 and 9. It comes from my recent study of sixty-six highly effective teachers of introductory general education theology and religion classes at institutions both public and private (*Teaching and Learning*). Some of these faculty were experts at helping students address "big questions" without pushing students toward any particular stance or blurring the boundaries between academic and religious instruction. Here is part of a student's journal, from a public university general education course titled "Christianity and Cultures."[2] The journal, by a student who chose to remain anonymous but gave permission for use of his work, was written in response to viewing a film about South Africa's Reconciliation effort and its philosophy of "ubuntu." Let's ask whether the kinds of thinking reflected in this journal entry could be described as learning goals, and then assessed.

> *Ubuntu* means: When you hurt others, you always hurt everyone, including yourself. Kant would call this a universal law, a law applicable at all times to all situations. The deontological nature (having morality in one's motives) of *Ubuntu* makes it interesting in that it is an internal quality and not a set of choices, and it seems that either people have it, or they don't. *Ubuntu* is the real point of the movie, and they actually are testing you in the context of the

	5	4	3	2	1
Thesis	The thesis of the paper is clear, complex, and challenging. It does not merely state the obvious or exactly repeat others' viewpoints, but creatively and thoughtfully opens up our thinking about the work.	The thesis is both clear and reasonably complex.	The thesis of the paper is clear. It takes a stand on a debatable issue, though the thesis may be unimaginative, largely a recapitulation of readings and class discussion, and/or fairly obvious.	Thesis is relevant to the assignment. It is discernible, but the reader has to work to understand it.	Thesis is irrelevant to the assignment and/or not discernible.
Complexity and Originality	The essay is unusually thoughtful, deep, creative, and far-reaching in its analysis. The writer explores the subject from various points of view, acknowledges alternative interpretations or literary-critical approaches, and recognizes the complexity of issues in literature and in life. Other works we have read and ideas we have discussed are integrated as relevant. The essay shows a curious and reflective mind at work.	The essay is thoughtful and extensive in its analysis. It acknowledges alternative interpretations/approaches and recognizes complexity in literature and in life. Some other works are integrated as relevant	The writer goes somewhat beyond merely paraphrasing someone else's point of view or repeating what was discussed in class. And/or the essay does not integrate other relevant works we have read.	Writer moves only marginally beyond merely paraphrasing someone else's point of view or repeats what was discussed in class.	The paper is mere paraphrase or repetition.
Organization and Coherence	The reader feels that the writer is in control of the direction and organization of the essay. The essay follows a logical line of reasoning to support its thesis and to deal with counter-evidence and alternative viewpoints. Sub-points are fashioned so as to open up the topic in the most effective way.	As for "5" but sub-points may not be fashioned to open up the topic in the most effective way.	The reader feels that the writer is in control of the direction and organization of the essay most of the time. The essay generally follows a logical line of reasoning to support its thesis.	The essay has some discernible main points.	The essay has no discernible plan of organization.
Evidence and Support	The writer's claims and interpretations are richly supported with evidence from the works we have read, secondary sources, and sensible reasoning. The writer assumes the reader has read the work and does not need the plot repeated, but the writer refers richly and often to the events and words of the literature to support his/her points.	As for "5" but the writer may briefly drop into mere plot summary.	The writer's claims and interpretations about the works are generally backed with at least some evidence from the works. The writer may briefly drop into mere plot summary.	The writer's claims are sometimes backed with evidence and/or the paper drops often into mere plot summary.	The paper is primarily plot summary.
Style	The language is clear, precise, and elegant. It achieves a scholarly tone without sounding pompous. It is the authentic voice of a curious mind at work, talking to other readers of the literary work.	The language is clear and precise.	The language is understandable throughout.	The language is sometimes confusing. Sentences do not track.	The language is often confusing. Sentences and paragraphs do not track.

	5	4	3	2	1
Sources	The essay integrates secondary sources smoothly. It quotes when the exact words of another author are important, and otherwise paraphrases. It does not just string together secondary sources, but uses them to support the writer's own thinking. Each source is identified in the text, with some statement about its author; there are no quotes just stuck into the text without explanation.	As for "5" but sources may occasionally be quoted with no contextual explanation.

And/or writer may use direct quotation and paraphrase in less than optimal ways. | The essay does not just string together secondary sources, but uses them to support the writer's own thinking. | The essay strings together secondary sources. | There is no use of secondary sources. |
| **Grammar and Punctuation** | There are no discernible departures from Edited Standard Written English (ESWE). | There are a few departures from ESWE. | There are no more than an average of 2 departures from ESWE per page in the critical areas listed below. | There are more than 2 from ESWE per page in the critical areas listed below. | Some portion of the essay is impossible to read because of departures from ESWE. |

Critical Areas:

- Spelling or typographical errors
- Sentence boundary punctuation (run-ons, comma splices, fused sentences, fragments)
- Use of apostrophe, -s, and -es
- Pronoun forms
- Pronoun agreement, and providing antecedents for pronouns
- Verb forms and subject-verb agreement
- Use of gender-neutral language
- Capitalization of proper nouns and of first words in the sentence

Fig. 1. Rubric for Evaluating Student Literary-Critical Essays, Barbara E. Walvoord, date unknown.

movie. They test you not on your critique of the confessors and aggressors or their victims or terrorists, but on your judgment of Anna Malon's affair with Langston Whitfield. I fell prey to this as I should have, but soon realized that my very judgment and scoffing at the fact that I could NEVER forgive a woman that cheated on me, was in fact a measurement of my *Ubuntu*. Earlier in the movie I was trying to reconcile the philosophy of *Ubuntu* with my own beliefs, and especially my ego, and decided that it may fit to some degree, but I was wrong. When confronted with the idea (and past experience) of a woman cheating on me, I felt hate and anger, and wanted to hurt the woman … whom I am supposed to forgive. By understanding my level of *Ubuntu* I can better understand how they can forgive (but not forget) the atrocities committed in South Africa; and I also recognize that my *Ubuntu* is scarce, at least at this point in my life. This is the true point of the movie, to make us take account of our own *Ubuntu*.

What are the ineffable qualities of this journal that we might want to encourage in other students? The student is

- Relating the film to his own life, explaining the connections;
- Bringing in material (Kant, deontology) from another course or other reading to help him think about big questions;
- Reflecting an ongoing change in his thinking about the film, open to new ideas, new experiences, new directions;
- Analyzing the themes and purposes of the film in relation to the "big questions" it poses.

So how could we evaluate a sample of student journals? One simple option would be to take the four qualities above and simply look for their presence in the journals. Readers could identify whether the quality appeared at all, whether it appeared frequently and habitually over a number of journal entries, and/or whether it appeared in limited ways or more fully developed ways. Such an analysis would at least show the department what percentage of its senior students' journals included these kinds of thinking.

To be more precise, we could we construct a rubric for these journal entries. Fig. 2 is one attempt.

Assignment: Journals are to record students' reflections about how the literature relates to their own search for meaning and values, and the way in which the literature may help them enter new perspectives, new worlds.

Connecting Literature to "Big Questions" in Students' Own Lives and Values; entertaining new perspectives and worldviews

1. Journal entries merely summarize/analyze the literature AND/OR merely reflect on the student's struggle with "big questions" but make little or no explicit connection between the two.
2. Journal entries summarize/analyze the literature AND reflect students' struggle with "big questions." In at least one instance, the entry makes a connection between the two, but the connection is abbreviated, or it uses the literature in a simple way to draw "lessons" to apply to the student's own life, or the student simply states that she agrees or disagrees.
3. One entry makes thoughtful links between the literature and the student's own struggle with big questions. It recognizes the complexity both of the literary work and of the "big questions." The journal entry reflects a willingness to entertain perspectives and understandings that are new to the student.
4. More than one entry does as in 3 above.
5. All of the entries do as in 3 above. The students' musings are rich and deep, showing a thoughtful, reflective mind at work.

Fig. 2. Rubric for Journals in English Literature, Barbara E. Walvoord, date unknown.

A report to the department might show a table of rubric score averages, and/or it might be a prose analysis of students' strengths and weaknesses.

This is my answer to the question we posed earlier about how to assess, and whether to assess, the ineffable values we often hold most dear. State those goals. Construct assignments that give you some indication of whether they are being achieved. State the criteria for assessing the assignment. Then examine student work. Such a system is not perfect. Readers will not necessarily

Learning Goals (as listed earlier, numbers 1-8)

Measure	Goals Addressed	How Information is Used
Senior student literary-critical essays in 3 classes that enroll seniors are evaluated by the instructors of those 3 courses. Instructors may use a rubric or they may write an evaluation of students' strengths and weaknesses in achieving the learning goals intended by the assignment.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	Instructors report to the department at the annual assessment meeting. Department reviews the evidence and takes action as needed.
Annually, seniors enrolled in all classes are asked to complete a survey asking them how well they have achieved each of the learning goals, what aspects of the program helped them, and what suggestions they have for improvement.	1-9	Survey results are reported to the department at the annual assessment meeting, as above
Faculty teaching the required American Literature course require student journals or online discussion boards that ask students to apply literature to their own search for meaning and values. A sample of these journals are read and discussed each summer by the instructors of the course, who look for evidence of these kinds of learning, and who present an analysis to the department.	8, 9	Reader's report is presented to the department at the annual assessment meeting, as above.

Conclusion of the assessment report for accreditors who need to know that the department is doing assessment:

Examples of changes based on assessment data

• Three years ago, at the annual meeting, faculty decided to focus on senior students' difficulties in goal number 3, using varied theoretical and literary-critical approaches. An examination of the students' essays revealed several aspects to this problem. Two focus groups of students in two different senior-level courses provided further insights. The department examined its curriculum to identify classes where students were asked, within the same class, to apply two or more literary-critical approaches to a single piece of literature. The department then made changes in certain courses that would provide more instruction, practice, and feedback in that learning goal.

Alternate conclusion of the report for planning, budgeting and program review bodies that need to know what the department has most recently found and what are its plans and budgetary needs:

Conclusions and plans

The department, on the basis of its most recent assessment meeting, has decided to focus on students' ability to achieve goals 8 and 9. We plan to take the following action:

• Hold four soup & brown-bag lunches. At the first meeting, Professor Haswold will present a review of the literature on this topic, particularly the work of the Teagle Foundation and the current programs sponsored by the AAC&U. At the next meeting, Professor Kim Graham, of Anyville University, will speak to our department faculty about how to support students' search for meaning without violating church-state separation or our own academic and scholarly principles. At the third meeting, department members will share ideas with one another and examine strategies that seem to work in our own classrooms. At the final meeting, we will discuss possible implications for department-wide action.

   – Cost:
     • Soup and drinks for four lunches
     • Honorarium and mileage to Professor Graham

Fig. 3. Sample Departmental Assessment Report, Barbara E. Walvoord, date unknown.

evaluate a student journal in the same way. You'll be aware that you are only viewing a whiff of smoke from the fire you hope burns within the student's heart. But it is something. It makes the department go beyond the groundless spinning of words, to ask, "Do we have *any* indication that students are achieving what we hope?" The ensuing faculty discussion, and the sharpened atten-

tion to these goals by individual faculty in their classrooms, may be the most valuable outcomes.

Reporting Your Assessment System

How does a department report its assessment system? Usually for two audiences:

- Accreditors and others who need to know *that the department is conducting assessment.*
- Administrators, budgeting and planning, and program reviewers who want to know *what the department found* and *what it plans to do* based on its assessment information.

Fig. 3 shows a sample report with two possible endings—one for each audience.

The sample report assumes the list of learning goals presented earlier, including the ineffable goals, numbers 8 and 9. It suggests some measures that might serve to indicate whether these goals were being achieved by students. It constructs some language by which the department might explain to outsiders what it does.

Conclusion

The point of this essay has been that assessment, while potentially dangerous, can be helpful and sustainable if it is done sensibly. The wise department needs just three things for assessment:

1. A set of learning goals (at the end of this program, students will be able to…).
2. Two measures that act as indicators of student learning:
   a. A direct measure: examine a sample of student work toward the end of their course of study. Identify strengths and weaknesses.
   b. An indirect measure: ask students what they thought they learned, what helped them learn, and their suggestions for improvement.
3. An annual meeting of two hours to consider the evidence about student learning and choose one item for action.

Within this system, a department can find ways to articulate its most ineffable goals for student learning and to gather indications about how well students are achieving them.

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NOTES

1 For a definition of academic freedom, see Association of American Colleges and Universities, "Academic Freedom and Educational Responsibility."

2 The course is described in *Teaching* 122-28.

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BIOGRAPHY

Barbara E. Walvoord has taught English composition and literature courses for more than thirty years. She was named the Maryland English Teacher of the Year for Higher Education in 1987. She has directed four writing across the curriculum or teaching/learning centers and has consulted or led faculty workshops at more than 350 institutions of higher education on topics of writing across the curriculum, teaching and learning, and assessment. She coordinated the University of Notre Dame's reaccreditation self study in 2004. She

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