“Bridging General Education and the Major: Critical Thinking, the Mid-Curriculum, and Learning Gains Assessment”

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Background: Core Curriculum Reform at UNR

- Outcomes-based learning throughout general education and undergraduate majors
- Relies on continuous development of fundamental competencies (written and oral communication, quantitative analysis, critical thinking)
- Student learning assessed via 3 points in the major (introductory, “gateway” or mid-curricular, senior)
• Introductory general education courses and senior capstones: written/oral communication and quantitative reasoning better established and more easily identified in previous Core than is critical thinking

• Mid-curricular or “gateway” courses: role of these competencies not readily apparent in major

  • Compounded by the difficulty in identifying critical thinking in both general education and the major
Surveying the Murky Middle: Introductory Courses

ENG 102 [multi-stage research project]
• Engage in critical reading and writing
• Summarize, analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and apply

Core Humanities [short papers, exams]
• Read, understand, summarize, analyze, and apply a range of written and cultural sources
• Critically read and interpret texts in their historical and cultural contexts
Surveying the Murky Middle: “Gateway” Major Courses

ENG 282 [exercises, exams]
Analyze language, explain language change, apply tools for analysis

ENG 298 [exams, short papers/one text]
Critically evaluate, analyze literature in historical context

ENG 303 [short papers, research paper/secondary sources]
Apply a range of critical theories, concepts of culture, race, gender, and class related to literary analysis
Surveying the Murky Middle: Culminating/Major Capstone Courses

ENG 492B [short papers, research paper/secondary sources]

Analyze literary texts in their historical, critical, and theoretical contexts

Assess relationships between language and culture of origin to a series of works or body of literature
Plotting out Combination/Specification

**Core Courses**

- Critical reading
- Analytical and interpretive writing
- Short, small-scale projects
- Modest research expectations

**“Gateway” courses**

- Acquire conceptual frameworks, vocabularies
- Begin applying frameworks in short, small-scale projects with limited focus/scope (e.g., additional secondary sources)

**Capstone Courses**

- Combine conceptual frameworks, vocabulary in sophisticated ways
- Apply in longer projects of greater scope (apply frameworks to multiple primary sources, integrate multiple secondary sources)
## Plotting out Elaboration (Women’s Studies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core/Introductory Courses</th>
<th>“Gateway” courses</th>
<th>Capstone Courses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Critical reading</td>
<td>• Application of theories to current and historical issues</td>
<td>• Application of knowledge of theories to identify social challenges and advocate change</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Analytical writing</td>
<td>• Explaining theories and issues to multiple audiences</td>
<td>• Design research projects that encompass primary and secondary sources and address social issues</td>
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<td>addressing theoretical arguments</td>
<td>• Longer papers with limited research, group discussions</td>
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<td>• Short, small-scale projects</td>
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Core and Introductory Courses

- Explain foundational theories of chemistry
- Formulate hypotheses and collect data
- Identify role of chemical problems in real-world issues
- Examinations

“Gateway” Courses

- Identify and debate ethical issues in real-world contexts
- Identify and debate ethical issues in research
- Writing and presenting on case studies

Capstone Course

- Analyze problems with an existing chemical or industrial process
- Integrate, synthesize, and apply knowledge of chemical issues to environmental ones
- Problem solving in research
- Presenting arguments to multiple audiences
Assessing Student Learning: Problems and Suggested Resolutions

• (1) Identifying/Defining critical thinking (CT)
• (2) Variety of disciplines and degree requirements
• (3) Faculty consensus on criteria for evaluating student work

• (1) Department faculty should list SLOs, courses, assignments in which CT is articulated (curricular mapping)
• (2) Use general education/core courses for assessing student learning
• (3) Mingle institution-wide criteria with those authored by department faculty
Workshop: Identifying Critical Thinking

- Small groups should:
  - review **front side of the heuristic**
  - agree on a spokesperson who is knowledgeable about general education and its role in majors at his/her institution
  - **ask this person the heuristic questions** and consider how his/her responses might apply to others’ home institutions
  - **note any other questions** that they wish to ask of all of us
- Spokesperson should deliver a **two-minute** report to all of us and **ask a question from the group’s list**
Online Resources

• At www.unr.edu/assessment, you’ll find:
  • slides and handouts from workshop
  • UNR course learning outcomes that address critical thinking
  • notes from our discussion

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