

A photograph of a university campus. In the foreground, a large tree with vibrant pink blossoms is in full bloom. Behind it, a classical building with several tall, grey columns is visible. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds. In the background, another building and more trees are visible under a bright sky.

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

Dr. Jane Detweiler, Associate Dean, College of Liberal Arts

Dr. Russell Stone, Assistant Vice Provost of Assessment & Accreditation

University of Nevada, Reno

www.unr.edu/assessment



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)

Core Curricular Reform: Problems in Translation

- **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)

Core/Introductory Courses

- Critical reading
- Analytical writing addressing theoretical arguments
- Short, small-scale projects
- Modest research expectations

“Gateway” courses

- Application of theories to current and historical issues
- Explaining theories and issues to multiple audiences
- Longer papers with limited research, group discussions

Capstone Courses

- Application of knowledge of theories to identify social challenges and advocate change
- Design research projects that encompass primary and secondary sources and address social issues

Plotting out Elaboration (Chemistry)

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

Contact Information

Jane Detweiler, College of Liberal Arts (jad@unr.edu)

Russell Stone, Office of the Provost (crstone@unr.edu)