



“In the Murky Middle: Assessing Critical Thinking and Integrative Learning Across the General Education/Major Divide”

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Background: Core Curriculum Reform at UNR

- Outcomes-based learning through 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, 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
- **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)

Case Study at UNR: A curriculum of “ELABORATION” and “DEEPENING OF ENGAGEMENT”

How do Women’s Studies majors demonstrate critical thinking across 3 levels of courses?

Aligned Course SLOs	Role of Critical Thinking
Introductory: Students identify and explain basic concepts behind gender issues and theories and apply theory through writing and discussion	Analyzing how theories inform gender issues (examinations, short papers)
Mid-curricular: Students apply theory to current issues and contextualize current issues within historical construct	Using theories to explain current gender issues to different audiences (group presentations, longer papers)
Senior: Students analyze theories and issues from an interdisciplinary perspective and apply theory to the laws, practices, etc. that account for gendered identities	Using theories and perspectives to identify challenges and advocate change (research paper)

Assessment Method #1: Common Questions

- **Introductory:** Student understanding of key theories and concepts assessed by common questions in examinations across sections of WMST 101:
 - Difference between the terms “sex” and “gender”
 - Influence of ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic class, etc. on notions of gender
- Strictly quantitative and anonymous

Assessment Method #2: Rubrics

- **Mid-curricular and Senior:** Built rubrics based on skills, including application and analysis of theories, that the faculty identified as high priority for students:
 - To the extent possible, tailored them to courses and curricula and their SLOs
 - Relied on faculty input
 - Standardized across department while allowing room for faculty to insert criteria
 - Matched students' names to scores

Assessment Method #3: Pre- and Post-Surveys

- Administered before and after a class, sequence of classes, or declaration of major and application to graduate
- Asked students to rate their ability and the importance of:
 - Critically reading texts and engaging with their arguments
 - Distinguishing ethical dilemmas from factual issues
 - Engaging with the opinions of others
 - Understanding relevance of discipline to real-world issues