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

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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
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?

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