

Liberal Arts Outcomes: Assessing Teaching and Learning in English

Report on a Virtual Listening

April 20 – May 1, 2005

The systematic assessment of what and how college students learn holds great promise for increasing our understanding of—and so our ability to enhance—their college education. While externally imposed assessment exercises have often felt to college and university communities something like the albatross that plagued Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, it seems possible that ground-up, faculty-driven assessment efforts could be quite different: they have the potential to help articulate the goals of a liberal arts education, to generate information about whether we are meeting those goals, and to tell us what we do especially well. The Teagle Foundation has funded several projects that explore this thinking in relation to general education. We are at a more preliminary stage in our thinking about assessment in specific academic disciplines, and want to move forward in this area. Taking the field of English as a test case, we have been wondering: What can be gained from systematic assessment of teaching and learning in the discipline of English? What assessment efforts are currently under way in departments of English across the country? Are there discipline-specific concerns that demand particular assessment practices, and do those practices exist, or could they be developed, given the appropriate time and support?

In search of answers, we convened our first “virtual listening,” an asynchronous conversation in which a dozen colleagues currently teaching in departments of English and/or involved in administrative work took part. Participants of course brought to the discussion their own thoughts on assessment, as well as what they are hearing at their institutions, and the institutions represented varied considerably: private and public institutions, liberal arts colleges and large universities, urban and rural institutions, and a professional association were all in the mix. To ensure a full and frank discussion, we assured participants that their identities and the full text of the Virtual Listening would remain confidential. This report on their work is therefore general, but textured enough—we hope—to spark further response from those who read it.

The discussion ranged from guardedly optimistic to unguardedly skeptical about the possibilities for assessment of teaching and learning in departments of English. At its heart was the recognition that assessment is a topic to be reckoned with: even on those campuses where such assessment efforts are not formally under way, questions about this subject come up regularly, and on many campuses assessment protocols are being actively developed or have already been integrated into the curriculum. Some of those representing liberal arts colleges indicated that qualitative assessment in some form was a subject of interest (though not in all cases a regular practice) on their campuses, while those representing larger institutions described in detail the more quantitative measures they had developed. Everyone in the group was aware of the need to balance conceptual

issues against practical concerns to ensure that any assessment efforts are done in a way that benefits teaching and learning in the discipline. Crucial decisions turn on:

- The need to define the goals of an English major in order to define appropriate assessment instruments.
- The need to assess both content knowledge (what do our students know about literature and what do we think they should know?) and skills (do our students write well? think critically? use primary and secondary sources effectively?)
- The weight that should be placed on assessment of learning outcomes as opposed to assessment of the learning process.
- The range of instruments currently in use to assess content knowledge, skills, or both. These include grades (a potentially contentious subject given recent concern for grade inflation), placement tests, exit exams, surveys of graduating seniors, portfolios assembled over students' careers, and more.

Still, concerns remain:

- About whether assessment is not all too often driven by the demands of those outside the academy, whether they be accrediting agencies or parents who are footing large tuition bills and wondering where their dollars are going;
- About whether an assessment program might not be so labor intensive that it would, ironically, have a negative impact on the quality of teaching;
- About whether a culture of assessment could undercut faculty autonomy;
- About whether it is even possible to assess what matters most in the teaching of English literature, whether that be the "joy" of reading and interpretation or how to appreciate fully the elusive complexity of individual texts and networks of texts.

There was constant movement between these poles of discussion, but the overriding sense of the Virtual Listening was that assessment is an ever more visible concern on most campuses and will continue to be a priority. Towards the end of the discussion, one participant pointed out that we regularly assess "the structures within which learning takes place"—through external reviews of departmental performance, classroom visits by our peers, student evaluations, and more—but have "few opportunities . . . to assess actual learning." Those opportunities may materialize over time. A comment from a separate discussion threads suggests that assessment might—for example—become a topic of discussion as early as graduate school and so part of every scholar/teacher's baseline thinking about how to ensure effective teaching and learning in his or her discipline.