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English Discipline Assessment Report 2015/2016

English Discipline

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English Assessment 2015-16: 4000-level Courses (Research Seminar)

Background & Objectives:

In 2015-16, the English discipline assessed our 4000-level classes, which are exclusively research seminars, in order to see if students are coming into those courses with adequate preparation in research skills. Specifically, we wanted to know if students are able to find appropriate secondary sources, evaluate those sources, incorporate them into their research seminar papers in a range of ways, and ultimately synthesize the numerous voices such sources should introduce into a student's work (the authors of the secondary sources, the authors of the primary sources under consideration, and the student's own voice). We teach all of these skills in the 4000-level courses, but we assume *some* introduction to these skills before students enter the 4000-level courses. Thus, the query was to see if this assumption is indeed true.

Methods:

Our primary means of assessment for the 2015-16 academic year was to collect sample essays from the three research seminars taught this year (1 during the fall and 2 during the spring) as well as the research paper assignment for each of those classes, to convene a subcommittee of the three faculty members who taught these courses in order to evaluate and discuss the research assignments and the use of research in the essay samples, and to initiate a conversation about their findings in a meeting with *all* English faculty.

Sample: We collected three sample essays from each of the three seminars, for a total of nine essays. We believe this relatively small sample to be appropriate given the fact that each seminar enrolls a maximum of only twelve students. We also collected the research assignment for each of the three research seminars.

Subcommittee Meeting: The three faculty members (Julie Eckerle, Janet Ericksen, and Brook Miller) met to discuss the nine sample essays written in response to the three different research seminar assignments.

We organized our discussion around English's current Program Student Learning Outcomes (PSLOs):

1. Read and discuss in an analytical fashion both primary and secondary texts
2. Write a coherent argument, both with and without secondary sources
3. Demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the English language
4. Demonstrate basic knowledge of critical approaches to literary study
5. Demonstrate basic knowledge of literary history
6. Conduct basic scholarly research and present it in a professional, scholarly setting
7. Demonstrate a solid foundation for a lifelong appreciation of literature

However, we focused our discussion, in keeping with our assessment objectives for this year, on numbers 1, 2 (particularly the latter half), and 6. Our method was first to look at commonalities in the research paper assignment sheets and second to explain to the other faculty members how each of us saw students using and engaging with secondary research in their papers.

Findings:

Based on our discussion and analysis of the assessment materials collected this year, the subcommittee concluded that

- There is adequate consistency among the three research paper assignments considered for this year's assessment, and that differences appropriately reflect the different fields the seminars cover;

- Students *do* seem to be meeting basic expectations for 4000-level work (and for the research essay assignment in particular): they can find adequate credible sources, and they can incorporate these sources into their essays.
- Specifically, students incorporate research into their essays in the following ways:
 - To support or buttress claims that they would like to make but do not have to necessary expertise to make on their own;
 - To support an analytical claim;
 - To introduce and support close reading of a primary source;
 - To provide an argument or claim with which they disagree (thus including a counter-argument);
 - To provide historical or biographical context for a text or argument;
 - To introduce a theory that they then apply to a primary text; &
 - To survey a critical conversation about a topic, character, or text, thus contextualizing their own arguments.
- Yet students rarely combine more than one or two of these approaches in a single paper, and they rarely connect multiple scholars' arguments in order to create a coherent framework for analysis. Put differently, students rarely demonstrate versatility in how they apply their research.
- Students also continue to struggle with argument.
- And students do not incorporate research into their arguments in the more sophisticated ways that we would like to see, especially via synthesis of multiple ideas and voices. In the weakest examples, students incorporate research into their papers in a kind of "information dump," thus failing to synthesize the secondary and primary sources. In some cases, students failed to demonstrate a thorough understanding of the secondary sources themselves.
- Nonetheless, most students make impressive progress over the course of the seminar, and at least a few students every year produce essays that are good enough to be submitted as graduate school writing samples.

Analysis

Among other things, the subcommittee's findings confirm our discipline's belief that each level of the English curriculum must reinforce and continue to develop students' research skills. The theory in regard to how these course levels work is as follows:

- 1000-level: Writing for the Liberal Arts (WLA) introduces students to the basic research skills necessary to all academic coursework, not exclusive to (and perhaps not even including) literary analysis
- 2000-level: In Literary Studies, students are introduced to literary studies as an idea; in the survey courses and other elective courses, they are introduced to various aspects of the history of literary forms and traditions
- 3000-level: students encounter some research curated by the instructor, and they are often asked to provide some synthesis. Students are also often charged with gathering and annotating relevant research.
- 4000: The research seminars should develop skills introduced at the 3000-level but particular focus on how to synthesize a range of voices, theories, and claims in the same paper.

The biggest point of debate, however, seems to be about exactly when and how we teach students what to do with secondary sources. This is connected to a larger question about how 3000-level work differs from 4000-level work.

Furthermore, at every level, students continue to struggle with argument. As arguments become more complex, students struggle with the complexities entailed and the new skills they are expected to demonstrate. This seems a natural progression, though we noted it is important to continue to focus on practices of making argument. Since campus assessment goals involve moving students towards 'mastery,' we might, arguably, encourage more focus on perfecting the argumentative strategies encountered at earlier levels of the curriculum. However, we generally felt that the more complex research tasks essayed in seminar offered a useful expansion of students' skills while improving their capacity to tackle the kinds of arguments they encounter in 3000-level courses.

Finally, we suggest that one of the ways we can approach the current weaknesses in students' use of secondary sources is through a greater emphasis in *all* of our English courses on **reading**. In other words, we need to emphasize--with each piece of reading assigned to a class--what the argument is, how it is constructed, and how much work goes into scholarly argumentation. We need to help students see the bones of an essay. One way to do this is to incorporate exercises in scholarly reading that are disconnected from the pressures of a research paper, perhaps through 3000-level annotated bibliography assignments. Several tasks could be accomplished with this kind of assignment, and several different approaches could be taken. For example, students could be asked to find sources on the same topic from three different time periods in order to understand how the basic approach to a topic has changed. Or students could be asked to find a specific number of sources and then write a brief synthesis of how the scholars talk to one another.

On a positive note, the subcommittee believes that the PSLOs continue to be appropriate to our discipline goals and practices.

Outcomes

The subcommittee's primary recommendation, then, which will be discussed in a whole-discipline meeting, is to find better ways to encourage students to synthesize information.

We further recommend using scholarly essays in the 3000-level as reading exercises, getting students to understand what makes a scholarly argument valuable beyond, simply, close reading.

Related to this, the subcommittee suggests further conversation and ultimately decisions about how to practice and develop students' research skills in the 3000-level courses. What other research exercises, in addition to the annotated bibliography and the reading exercises described above, would be useful at this level? What are the merits of having students finding their own research as opposed to faculty giving them pre-selected readings at this level? What innovative exercises will help students find clusters of research around a single idea? Furthermore, we especially need to be clear about how the courses and the exercises incorporated in them *differ* from the 4000-level work.

Finally, we will discuss, as a discipline, the following aspects of our research seminar essay requirements:

- Paper Length: The three instructors who taught the research seminar in 2015-16 require papers ranging from 10 to 30 pages, which is a pretty significant range. That said, we agreed that it makes sense for Janet's papers to have a longer length requirement, since her students also have to include translations of passages in Old English. Might we recommend a *minimum* page length?
- Source Numbers: One of the three instructors requires a minimum of five secondary sources, whereas the other two are less specific. All three agree that engagement with secondary sources is expected. Thus we wonder if there should be a discipline-wide consensus on a minimum number or not.