

Special Challenges of Assessing Undergraduate Research in the Arts and Humanities

Departments in the arts and humanities are often inhospitable environments for assessment of learning outcomes. For one thing, student learning in these disciplines is not easily quantified. Also, department chairs and faculty members, having survived the culture wars of the 1990s, are understandably wary of any initiative that seems to demand a justification of what they do. In an atmosphere of distrust, assessment becomes little more than a defensive tactic.

When, on the other hand, departments take ownership of the process, assessment becomes a powerful tool in making an effective case for scarce resources. We have found that the best approach to assessment starts with first principles (historical perspectives on the discipline, the fundamental aims and methods of its research), then proceeds to instrumental issues (what to measure and how to measure it).

Research

Defining “the arts” and “the humanities” is a perpetual work in progress. In *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1983), Raymond Williams meticulously demonstrates how “art,” the domain of virtually all academic study in the Middle Ages, gradually emerged as an oppositional term for distinguishing one of the two fundamental modes of inquiry that now flourish in modern universities. Today when we designate a particular line of endeavor as an art, we imply, according to Williams, that its “general use and intention [are] not determined by immediate exchange” (p. 42). This accounts for the familiar dichotomy between art and industry, between fine art and design or technology—a dichotomy that privileges or depreciates art, depending on the context. Modern universities, American institutions in particular, have carved up the curriculum more minutely by separating study of the classics from the other arts, supplementing it with literary criticism and philosophy, and thus delineating the humanities.

Recognizing that the definitions and boundaries of the arts and humanities have evolved over centuries and will continue to do so, we should constantly reappraise the types of inquiry, including research, that we valorize—and thus the knowledge and proficiencies that we expect undergraduates to acquire. Despite the popular impact of their controversial

books, Alan Bloom and E. D. Hirsch failed to persuade many faculty members in the arts and humanities that the answer is to impart knowledge of a prescribed body of canonical works. On the other hand, the practical exigencies of learning-outcomes assessment are not sufficiently addressed by using glib, unelaborated assertions about “creativity,” “self-knowledge,” or even “critical thinking.” Fairly or unfairly, such assertions are often construed as an evasion of accountability. Most faculty members in the arts and humanities remain convinced that their students develop creativity, self-knowledge, and skill at critical thinking and that these are worthy educational goals. The problem is one of defining those terms and verifying their acquisition in terms consistent with their respective academic disciplines. Specifically, we need to show how the work that we and our students do—especially research—fosters the proficiencies that we value.

We can begin with the premise that no single disciplinary perspective offers an authoritative explanation of the world in all its complexity. “Academic disciplines,” writes Sinclair Goodlad, “can be thought of as focusing devices that guide our perceptions selectively.” The inherent flaw of scientific orthodoxy, according to Goodlad, is that it constructs a “battleground ... about who controls what in the definition of appropriate knowledge, with the fundamental tension in devising liberal education being between the search for synthesis, the attempt to draw upon unifying ideas, and work that is so immersed in disciplinary detail as to lose any sense of a wider perspective” (2000, p. 8). A humanistic/artistic perspective, on the other hand, replicating the Platonic quest to reintegrate the alienated fragments of individual human experience, may accommodate more compelling representations of complex realities. Put another way, the arts and humanities offer an alternative to the rigoristic paradigm of the physical sciences—arguably one that better suits the needs of the contemporary world.

One often hears that students in the arts and humanities are more inclined to apply heuristic approaches to complex problems, while students in the sciences are more likely to rely on algorithms. In fact, recent research indicates that the former are more adept than other students at “creative exploration and analysis of ill-structured problems that have more than one



Undergraduate students perform in the UNCW Main Stage Theater.



Undergraduate members of the UNCW String Ensemble perform in Beckwith Recital Hall.



Undergraduate film studies students prepare for a screening of the film "Hula Girls".

possible solution" (Lampert, 2007, p. 29). The extent to which this can be attributed to disciplinary research methodologies, however, remains open to conjecture.

With a few notable exceptions (certain branches of linguistics, for example), research in the arts and humanities does not typically employ the experimental method. In its stead, the New Critics, during their post-World War II hegemony, upheld close textual analysis as a comparably rigorous methodology suitable to the arts and humanities. Since then, postmodern critics have methodically swept away most of the claims of New Criticism, beginning with the fundamental assumption that language is a clear and reliable medium for representing the world. Truth, in the words of one postmodern feminist, becomes a "destructive illusion" (Olesen, 1998, p. 311). Postmodernists argue that reality is better represented as a series of narratives or texts, no one of which is static or objective; knowledge is always situated and contingent. The authors of this article, for example—two white, middle-class, male American academics—could not definitively represent or interpret the culture of post-colonial Caribbean women in the view of postmodernists.

Predictably, many academics—not just those in the sciences—have greeted Postmodernism with bewilderment or derision, equating it with careless relativism (all scholarship is equally valid and meritorious) or intellectual negligence (if we can't prove anything, why advance any claims?). Scholars in the arts and humanities should therefore be able to trace the distinguishing features of their common research methodologies and to encourage undergraduate students to respect their validity.

One rigorous methodology common to the arts and humanities is qualitative field research, the aim of which is to validate findings through a range of interpretive strategies, no one of

which is entirely sufficient in isolation. Although this approach is commonly called triangulation, Laurel Richardson has proposed a more apt analogy:

The central image for "validity" for postmodern texts is not the triangle—a rigid, fixed, two dimensional object. Rather, the central image is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. ... Crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of "validity" (we feel how there is no single truth, we see how texts validate themselves);

and crystallization provides us with a deepened, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. (1998, p. 358)

Examples of such research abound in the arts and humanities, and students can be introduced to them in the gateway course for an undergraduate major.

Qualitative field research is, of course, only one research paradigm available to scholars in the arts and humanities. While other methodologies may appear less conventional, most of the work we do, which includes traditional close reading and textual analysis, arises from the aim of improving the world rather than merely interpreting it. This aim, says Bruce Robbins (2007), is reflected in such learning outcomes as "student self-problematization, the exploration of how knowledge itself has been constructed, the recognition of multicultural diversity, and the critique of American imperial power" (p. 314). Demonstrating the value and relevance of these outcomes to an audience often inclined to view the academic and political realms as separate and distinct is one of our most daunting—and important—challenges. To make the most convincing case,

Robbins argues, we must carefully distinguish between literature and culture:

“One could say that literature always struggles to distinguish itself from society, while culture never quite escapes from being society. Thus culture promises to have a direct effect on society, to be able to change it, and literature promises to withdraw from it and thus interpret it critically. The legitimating logic of the doubleness is clear. Literature offers critics a more or less distinct body of materials to work on, materials that jar us loose from unexamined modes of social action and membership. Yet literary critics need the supplement of culture in order to explain how this social distance returns to society, as it were, in the form of some more or less palpable benefit. (pp. 314-315).”

Assessment

Before beginning a discussion of academic assessment, understanding the fundamental differences between tests and assessments is necessary. While tests are systematic methods of gathering information based on specific behaviors, assessments are more deliberative collections of information used to provide students with feedback (Radocy, Boyle, 1987). Assessments do not necessarily involve quantification of data, and they provide an alternative to the somewhat narrow approach offered by traditional tests in order to report student achievement (Campbell, Scott-Kassner, 2006). Assessments are also not limited to teacher-based feedback;

peer-assessments and self-assessments are practical and effective alternatives that allow other sources to provide feedback on student progress. Therefore, assessing student progress using multiple measures of achievement provides educators with more flexible and sophisticated tools than do factual tests. We assert that this is especially true in the arts and humanities, which are more suited to using qualitative data.

The need for quality in academic assessment is apparent, as indicated by demands for attention to this critical part of education (Frazier, 1994). Put succinctly, unless educators provide accurate and constructive feedback to students during their learning process, students will be at an inherent disadvantage. Regardless of discipline, this need for quality in assessments remains, even though the form and content of assessments may change. As Kekäle (2000) noted, however, achieving qual-



Left: Undergraduate members of the UNCW Concert Choir rehearse in the Cultural Arts Building.

Below: An undergraduate flutist performs in Beckwith Recital Hall at UNCW.



ity in assessments seems to be more challenging in the arts and humanities because the process is apparently slower, with more flexible parameters and more nebulous criteria. This perspective, coupled with the unfortunate tendency for assessments in the arts and humanities to be assembled as ad hoc measures, without sufficient attention to construction and validation, presents challenges for arts and humanities faculty members.

When examining assessments in academia, two basic types offer different types of insights useful for different purposes: formative and summative assessments. As defined by Yorke (2003), formative assessments are designed to “contribute to student learning through the provision of information about performance” (p. 478). Because they span a wide range from informal to highly structured (Rowntree, 1987), formative assessments seem particularly appropriate to the performing arts and humanities, especially given their ability to capture continuous progress and development (Brown, 1999). In contrast, summative assessments are more definitive and concluding measures designed to encapsulate and summarize the student’s work. In disciplines where divergent thought is more highly prized, such as the arts and humanities, perhaps formative assessments offer a more valuable way to track students’ progress. Because they can document growth over time, they can be used to document a student’s artistic process. Conversely, in disciplines where convergent thought is championed, more attention may be paid to the final answer or “bottom line” using summative assessments.

Instructors typically categorize students' academic learning based on its cognitive components. Students' knowledge about a particular topic or discipline is most often the goal; knowing facts or understanding principles of an academic subject is paramount. In 2001, Anderson and colleagues rearticulated Bloom's original 1956 cognitive taxonomy to distinguish six levels: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. This taxonomy is organized based on the progress of a student's intellect from general fundamental knowledge to more advanced understanding. Learning in the sciences and other disciplines often takes the form of cognitive knowledge and logical reasoning. These goals inform and prepare students for success in these fields based on disciplinary traditions and accepted principles. Similarly, in the arts and humanities, students learn an accepted body of terms and concepts related to specific pursuits such as painting, poetry, or music. One central element of students' learning in the arts and humanities is their internalization of key ideas.

While cognitive learning is certainly appropriate and useful in many disciplines across a wide range of academic subjects, other forms of learning are equally, if not more, important in the arts and humanities. Specifically, learning in the psychomotor and affective domains offer students unique benefits in the arts and humanities, as distinct from those in other disciplines. In a hierarchy similar to Bloom's taxonomy, psychomotor learning as structured by Harrow (1972) includes six levels: reflex movements, fundamental movements, perception, physical abilities, skilled movements, and no discursive communication (such as gestures and facial expressions). This taxonomy is based on the student's adaptation of movements going from the level of reflexes to more control and internalized motions. As structured by Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia (1964), affective learning has five levels: receiving, responding, valuing, organizing, and characterization. This taxonomy is organized based on the principle of internalization—the progress of a student's affect from a general awareness to a specific acceptance. The highest level results in a student's actions being guided by an internalized affect for the idea (Seels, Glasgow, 1990). The result may be seen as an emotional commitment to the work itself.

Perhaps because of the focus on cognitive learning in the sciences, Bloom's taxonomy has had more of an influence on assessment design and testing than either the affective or psychomotor taxonomies put forth by Harrow and by Krathwohl

and his colleagues (Yorke, 2003). In the arts and humanities, however, the psychomotor skills and, in particular, the affective responses provide critical perspectives for addressing the special challenges of assessing undergraduate learning and research.

Practical Applications

Practical applications of assessment in the arts and humanities are in no short supply at our university. Administrators are currently working to articulate the ways in which all departments are assessing and improving student learning. We notice, however, that there is a tendency to focus on cognitive learning outcomes instead of affective responses or psychomotor skills. Perhaps because of their very nature, non-cognitive learning outcomes present special challenges for measurement and testing. Nonetheless, for the arts and humanities, they also present unique opportunities to further students' experience and research in these disciplines.

Although the English department uses a dichotomous checklist to document how students demonstrate some writing skills, the broader learning outcomes are evaluated using a Likert-type scale. Specific items include: clarity of evidence, complexity of ideas, and effectiveness of conclusions.

In the music department, the assessment measures are used in several designated courses, including computer competency, juried performances, proficiencies, and capstone projects. On that level, the measures appear consistent with other academic departments. Implied in several of these courses, however, are key affective levels such as valuing, organization, and characterization. For example, to complete their capstone project successfully, students need to have characterized themselves as musicians, (e.g., as fledgling composers, performers, music educators, or musicologists). A successful juried performance necessitates affective response in combination with requisite psychomotor skills and cognitive understanding of the music. In these ways, students move beyond just "playing the notes" to deliver a convincing performance. On the undergraduate level, students can develop these skills through supervised research and honors projects.

In the arts and humanities, there is also a need for both cognitive and affective learning. Bridging this divide is important for undergraduate students because they need to learn the vocabulary and concepts of a particular discipline, while not



Undergraduate film studies students adjust a video camera.



Undergraduate film studies students collaborate to tape a scene.

losing sight of the affective impact that artistic works have. For example, learning to listen to music is both a cognitive and an affective experience; listeners are as moved by the expressive qualities of the music as by their understanding of it (Reimer, 1970). In other words:

the experience of the work is both a sharing and a discovering. In this sense, it is also a creative experience for the perceiver, in that the new experiences of feeling are made possible as he grasps more and more of the work's expressive subtleties [italics in original] (p. 67).

This opens the possibility for undergraduate learning in the arts and humanities to assume a more comprehensive profile. Instead of learning the names and dates of composers, for example, they are asked to connect with the art form itself. By doing so, they come to understand and appreciate its power through experience. This is perhaps the most powerful and meaningful aspect of the arts and humanities and one that, we assert, needs to be included in assessment measures for undergraduate research.

Conclusions

An examination of assessment of undergraduate research in the arts and humanities reveals the special challenges this task presents. Not only do students need to demonstrate cognitive learning more appropriate to scientific disciplines, they also need to connect with the unique experiences that the arts and humanities offer. Especially at the level of doing research in these fields, undergraduate students face the multi-dimensional tasks of knowing, feeling, and doing. Consequently, assessment measures in the arts and humanities may best be structured to reflect those cognitive, affective, and psychomotor tasks.

Despite the inherent challenges of academic disciplines, there is an opportunity to increase the overall quality of assessment in the humanities and the arts. Even with flexible parameters and interpretive meanings as part of the discipline, the arts and humanities would benefit from a more rigorous, yet thoughtful, approach to constructing assessments. Successful assessment tools would not only be valid but also flexible and multi-faceted, not unlike the arts and humanities themselves.

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