

Millikin University
College of Arts & Sciences
English Literature Major Assessment Report

22 June 2009

In addition to the learning goals of the core curriculum requirements of all English majors, the English Literature major has the following specific four learning outcome goals.

Goals and Mission of the English Literature Major

Millikin's English Literature Major continues to prepare students for a host of career options, among them graduate studies in English literature, publishing and editing, and virtually any career that asks for clarity of thinking and expression. Through the core English department curriculum, students gain a solid foundation in the literary traditions, profiting from learning side-by-side with all English majors and the emphasis of disciplinary specialty each major brings to the study of literature. Beyond this solid foundation, English literature majors gain advanced skills in the literary traditions, practice with theoretical methods, and writing critical prose. With the addition of EN 202 Writing About Literature, our majors come together early in their degree pursuit to explore literary theory and habits of scholarship, using short assignments to familiarize themselves with the varieties of method and practice. The capstone course, EN420, integrates theory and practice by requiring a full research project: a bibliographic study to know the existing scholarship and a scholarly paper to integrate their own reading of literary text(s) with those already published.

Learning Outcome Goals

All English Literature major students will:

- L1. have advanced understanding of a variety of literary genres.
- L2. have advanced understanding of literatures' historical, intellectual, and cultural contexts.
- L3. be able to apply literary criticism and theory in the interpretation of texts.
- L4. write a near-professional, original work of literary research and scholarship.

Snapshot

The assessment report will provide a brief overview of our curricula, facilities, and faculty/staff.

The Learning Story

The English Literature major has four main phases of instruction and development, emphasizing through all the integration of theory and practice. English Literature majors practice theory throughout the major and so are, by definition, integrating theory and practice.

Majors begin with the EN 202 Writing About Literature course, in which they gain a broad and thorough introduction to the variety of genres, the foundational method of explication, and an overview of literary theories. Students typically learn in groups to tease out meanings and apply methodologies of literary analysis. The current configuration of the course has the students

collaborate on a final research project, a substantial casebook. Students come to learn the fundamental methodologies of the discipline.

Literature majors fulfill all English core requirements in the traditions courses: Medieval/Classical Traditions, Major British Authors I & II, Shakespeare, American Literature to 1900, and 20th Century Literature. Beyond these core courses, Literature majors are required to take additional coursework in 300-level genre courses in which they augment their reading in the tradition. These courses begin the advanced practice of applying various methods of literary theory and interpretation. Among those critical theories routinely covered: deconstruction, psychoanalytic, gender/feminist, post-colonial, new historical, and the poetics/aesthetics of Romanticism, Victorianism, Modernism, many of which are either mentioned or directly implied in recent course titles.

The major culminates in the 420 Seminar in Literature, the capstone for Literature majors. Topics in this course are typically focused and prepare students for graduate level and graduate style seminars. The students, typically seniors, apply an in-depth knowledge of critical theory in producing an original work of literary research and scholarship. The Literature major at large, from its introduction (202), through its reading in and practice of literary theory (core and 300-level genre courses), requires the integration of theory and practice. The 420 Seminar asks the students to produce a scholarly essay that integrates existing scholarship and theoretical perspectives with the student's own reading or approach to an examined work(s). By asking the students to produce a near-professional, original work of literary research and scholarship, EN 420 concludes the student's development as a reader, researcher, thinking, and scholar in English literature.

Assessment Methods

The English Department uses the written portfolio method to assess its learning goals. Portfolios will begin in the freshman year with EN 105, continue with EN 202, and culminate with EN 420. Students will gather in one place work that represents the kind and quality of writing and research they're producing throughout the degree. By having the representative work in one place, student and faculty can gauge student learning in process. The portfolio will remain a touchstone through the degree, and the activity of maintaining and updating it (adding to and substituting new work for old) will encourage students to overtly reassess their old work in light of new learning. The portfolios and the rubrics for evaluating them allow for quantitative assessment of the major. At the end of the Spring semester, English faculty on the Literature Major Assessment Committee review the Senior Literature Portfolios, evaluating the quality of learning demonstrated for each learning goal, using the portfolio essays review rubric.

Portfolio Artifact 1: essay based on genre

Portfolio Artifact 2: essay on literature related to contexts

Portfolio Artifact 3: essay employing literary critical theory

Portfolio Artifact 4: scholarly essay

Students select the essays for inclusion in their portfolio, often as a professionalizing effort to prepare applications for graduate school and to have a portfolio of representative writing at hand.

As the artifacts correspond with Literature major learning goals, these artifact essays will come out of the following coursework where faculty prioritize those goals.

English Literature major students will:

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- L2. have advanced understanding of literatures' historical, intellectual, and cultural contexts.
- L3. be able to apply literary criticism and theory in the interpretation of texts.
- L4. write a near-professional, original work of literary research and scholarship

Literature Major Requirements	Literature Major Learning Goals (EN202, EN420 & Three Advanced Genre Courses)			
	L1-understand a variety of literary genres	L2-understand literatures' historical, intellectual & cultural contexts	L3-apply literary criticism & theory in interpretation of texts	L4-write a near-professional work of literary research
English major traditions core	•	•		
EN202 Writing About Literature			•	
Genre Course: EN340 Poetry	•			
Genre Course: EN350 Fiction	•			
Genre Course: EN360 Drama	•			
Genre Option: EN366 Literary History		•		
EN420 Seminar in Literature			•	•

The English Major Committee will use the following rubric for assessing levels of achievement in the sampled portfolios and, by extension, in the English department's achieving its own goals of graduating profession-ready majors.

Senior Literature Portfolio Evaluation Rubric

The rubric has changed slightly for 2009. Because a 3-point ranking system is universally regarded as inadequate for providing valid data, the Literature Program has assigned a numerical value to each of the established rankings. Both the English and CWRR assessment reports acknowledge the inadequacies of the three-tier system, consistently using vague rankings like "high yellow" or "almost green" to characterize positions between the stop lights. The Literature Program has each person on the assessment committee evaluate each portfolio. The numerical values are then averaged to produce a final ranking for each portfolio in each learning goal, with discussion provided below.

	Green (3)	Yellow (2)	Red (1)
Artifact 1: genre essays Related goal: L1	Portfolio includes essays that clearly present knowledge of the inherent and established features of literary genres.	Portfolio includes some essays that present knowledge of genre features and methods of literary genres.	Portfolio includes essays that have difficulty discussing fundamental genre distinctions and their workings.
Artifact 2: essays related to contexts Related goals: L2	Portfolio includes essays that clearly present a range of contextual factors and contributors to text. Essays clearly articulate not only what those factors are, but how they effect authors and the works they produce.	Portfolio includes some essays that demonstrate a knowledge but not a full range of contextual factors and contributors to text. Essays attempt to articulate not only what those factors are, but how they effect authors and the works they produce.	Portfolio includes essays that discuss a limited range of contextual factors influencing authors and the works they produce.
Artifact 3: essays employ critical theory Related goals: L3	Portfolio includes essays that ably and aptly handle critical theory in the interpretation of text. The critical reading makes use of the critical method, more than simply restating the assessments of other scholars.	Portfolio includes essays that attempt to use a critical method in interpreting the text. Essays may make equal use of interpreting and restating the findings of other scholars.	Portfolio includes essays that demonstrate a limited understanding of theoretical application and the way theory can open up a text. Essays rely primarily on a restatement of other scholars' findings.
Artifact 4: Scholarly essay Related goals: L4	Portfolio includes an essay that includes a bibliographic history on the examined work(s) of literature. The essay will voice an approach or a reading of the work(s) that the bibliography doesn't already (in whole or collectively) articulate.	Portfolio includes an essay with a bibliographic history on the examined work(s) of literature. The essay will attempt to voice a new approach or reading.	Portfolio includes an essay with a partial bibliographic history on the examined work(s) of literature. The essay has difficulty voicing a new approach or reading.

Assessment Data

Portfolios of graduating seniors will be assessed each spring semester. The program collected portfolios from three students. Students choose the artifacts that they deem best fit the learning goals, and one artifact can meet more than one goal. The Literature Program had three seniors graduate in Spring 2009. Only two submitted portfolios. One committee member chose to supplement materials included in Portfolio 2 with other materials from other classes, and Portfolio 3 was pulled together from work that had been submitted during the course of that student's four years at Millikin. Because the process relies on self-selection--which can reveal much about student understanding of the learning goals--Portfolio 3 is evaluated separately, and the second committee member chose to assess only those artifacts submitted by the students.

Literature Portfolio 2009

Goal	Portfolio 1	Portfolio 2	Average
Goal 1: essays related to genre	3	1.5	2.25
Goal 2: essays related to contexts	2.5	1	1.75
Goal 3: essays employ critical theory	2.5	1.5	2
Goal 4: scholarly essay	2	2	2

Additional Portfolio 2009

Goal	Portfolio 3		Avg All
Goal 1: essays related to genre	1.5		2
Goal 2: essays related to contexts	2		2
Goal 3: essays employ critical theory	2.5		2.16
Goal 4: scholarly essay	2.5		2.16

Analysis of Assessment Results

The two portfolios submitted to the assessment team show few strengths. Surprisingly, L1 was a strength. Yet none of the portfolios averaged in the Green range for any learning goal. One reason for difficulties with genre is the vagueness of the term. The Literature Program has never defined genre. The course structure does provide a definition. Genre, according to the English Department, refers to the "large classes" (Abrams 115) of literature: lyric, epic/narrative, drama. Literature scholars since the 1950s have, however, largely abandoned this tri-fold structure, first with the inclusion of the essay as a fourth large class and, then, with a recognition that genres are largely dependent on the literary tastes of the historical period and geographic region. While one paper in Portfolio 2 does talk about *Beloved's* Denver as an epic hero, epic is not one of the genres reflected in the English Department's course structure. It would be considered, perhaps, a sub-genre. A similar problem is student self-selection of artifacts. Having the students select artifacts that they believe best reflect their performance for particular goals is valuable. It reveals how much the students know about the goals and about their own work in relation to those goals.

However, often we find artifacts that work well for a particular goal, and yet the student did not identify that artifact as a good example of the goal. Portfolio 1 contains such an example. One paper analyzes the how the poetry is used in Medieval Drama, yet the student selected another piece for L1. This problem, again, could be related to the vagueness of *genre*. According to M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham's *Glossary of Literary Terms*, "By many critics at the present time . . . genres are conceived to be more or less arbitrary modes of classification, whose justification is their convenience in discussing literature" (116). There are similar problems with the assessment of the portfolios. The main requirement of L4 is a bibliographic history of the work being studied. Many artifacts, first, discuss many works and, second could not include a full bibliographic history of any of the works being studied. This presents a serious problem for the team doing the assessment. How many faculty could evaluate a bibliographic history of *The Lord of the Rings*? *Beowulf*? *Dune*?

Strengths

As stated above, these portfolios did not display many strengths, at least in relation to the program goals. They do, however, represent some very good writing and analytical abilities and original insight, none of which is reflected in our goals or the rubric for assessment. All of the portfolios scored in the Yellow range; the lack of a Red score is a definite strength, then. The high point seems to be the production of a near-professional project. The overall numerical average is highest for this learning goal, although it is still in the Yellow range.

Areas for Improvement

All areas are in need of improvement. While we did have some good results with genre, other areas are not nearly as solid, and none of the portfolios averaged in the Green range. The lowest average for the student-submitted portfolios was in L2, which is in the Yellow range.

Four-Year Comparative Analysis

The Literature Program has collected four years of assessment data, and in each of the previous reports, it has included a multiple year comparison.

A comparison of three years of assessment data reveals that we need to improve student results for the goals or, perhaps, reconsider some of our goals.

4-Year Comparison

Goal	2006	2007	2008	2009	AVG
L1	Yellow 2 Yellow 2 Red 1	Yellow2	Red 1 Red 1 Yellow 2	3 1.5	1.72
avg	1.67	2	1.33	2.25	
L2	Yellow 2 Yellow 2 Yellow 2	Green 3	Yellow 2 Red 1 Yellow 2	2.5 1	1.94
avg	2	3	1.67	1.75	
L3	Yellow 2 Yellow 2 Yellow 2	Green 3	Green 3 Yellow 2 Red 1	2.5 1.5	2.11

avg	2	3	2	2	
L4	Yellow 2 Red 1 Yellow 2	Yellow 2	Green 3 Red 1 Yellow 2	2 2	1.89
avg	1.67	2	2	2	
Avg	1.916	2.5	1.83	1.875	

The trend from 2006 to 2007 is promising. The 2006 portfolios had only two red scores. The 2007 portfolio had only one score that was not green. However, the progression to 2008 is troublesome, with five red scores and only two green scores (from the same portfolio). This trend remedies itself a bit in 2009. In fact, the overall trend is very gradual improvement or steady maintenance in all of the goals except L2, which declined in 2008 but then improved some from that in 2009.

This having been said, although the Literature Program has four years of data, we do not have a significant number of total artifacts upon which to base definitive conclusions. Nine artifacts is simply not enough upon which to base large-scale programmatic changes.

Improvement Strategies

1. Discussion and Revision of Learning Goals

The English Department, but as a whole and the Literature Program, needs to have a frank discussion about the established goals. Our course offerings and Core Requirements for the major work at cross purposes. Advanced literature courses are ostensibly genre-based. The core is historically-based, and the advanced literature courses fulfill areas of the core requirements.

The Department needs to determine the validity of genre studies, particularly in light of the state of the profession. Additionally, each of the learning goals needs to have its rubric revised to reflect what the profession expects. L4, for instance, needs to include much beyond a literature review. The emphasis on scholarly sources for L4 is merited; the 2008 committee questioned how a literature review (the basic form of the green rating) could relate to the official wording of the goal: “write a near-professional, original work of literary research and scholarship,” since many professional literary articles do not include a formal literature review (rather, they do this as a statement of lack of scholarship, to situate themselves within a community of specific ideas, present scholarship as further-reading footnotes, or use scholarly comments throughout their own analysis). Moreover, far more goes into a “near-professional” piece of literary criticism than scholarship—methodology, preciseness of language, argumentation, use of evidence, etc. While a thorough knowledge of scholarship is essential for a scholarly essay, the rubric should include other criteria as well.

2. Portfolio Assembly/Collection

The 2008 committee discussed some trends that the student-selected portfolios revealed. Since one of the members was familiar with the students’ work, he identified artifacts that may have worked better to demonstrate particular goals. Additionally, two students paired artifacts with what seemed to be the wrong goals. While this may reveal a lack of student understanding of the

concepts related to the goals (or simply lack of understanding of the goals themselves), it also reveals that student selection of artifacts can be misleading. The committee came up with some options for artifact assembly and collection:

A. Begin the process in the 1-credit required EN 105 (Introduction to Millikin English Studies). Dr. O’Conner will have students establish portfolios organized on Moodle and instruct them to post every paper that they write to that repository.

B. Transform the selection process in one of the following ways:

1. Transform EN 420 into a 1-hour capstone directed study. The course, as it stands, is simply another literature course, since it must be cross listed with one of our 300-level studies course. The 1-hour capstone would be a true capstone, which would fill in knowledge gaps, provide a forum for students to revise quality work already done, and allow them to judge their best work and assemble a portfolio.

2. Have students choose their portfolio artifacts in consultation with their advisors. This would provide much-needed faculty input into which artifacts fulfill the particular goals, while still permitting students to select artifacts.

3. Simply require students to submit the 3-4 artifacts that they believe best represent the quality of their work, without pairing the artifacts to goals. Then the assessment committee would rate the portfolio as a whole according to the goals.

Obviously, there are advantages and disadvantages to all of these recommendations. The committee firmly believes that recommendation A be adopted. It will provide students with an introduction to the portfolio concept and a place for them to keep their work, though faculty in other literature courses should continually remind students to post their work to their Moodle portfolio. While the committee believes that B1 would be a benefit to the student, it would require that literature majors take another 3-credit 300-level studies course. B2 would require some extra work for faculty advisors, though this, in the end, is work that should be done to help students prepare a writing sample for job and graduate school applications. B3 is perhaps the most problematic, since it does not guarantee that artifacts will meet any of the goals.

3. Replace Portfolio with Capstone Project

The portfolio method of assessment works for some programs, such as CWRR. However, for other programs the portfolio method is overkill. A near-professional quality project will, by its nature, demonstrate mastery of the other goals. It will need to include critical theory (L3), present contexts (L2), include scholarship (L4), and--at times--present an awareness of genre (L1). The project produced in EN 420--the Literature Major capstone course--should provide the assessment committee with the data needed to assess adequately the progress of the program. The committee recommends that the assessment artifact become the EN 420 project. Such a change will eliminate the need for voluntary student submission, which has not always worked in the past, since the EN 420 instructor can submit the artifact to the assessment committee at the end of the course.

4. L2 Contexts

While students have demonstrated a familiarity with contexts, they have not demonstrated that they “have *advanced* understanding of literatures’ historical, intellectual, and cultural contexts” (emphasis added). To improve this area, the literature committee should establish some guidelines for literature courses and clarify this in the rubric.

5. L3 Critical Theory

Millikin students still need work on understanding and using critical theory. EN 202 (Writing about Literature) will definitely help, but the introductory information presented in that course should be reinforced in 300-level studies courses. It is still too early to determine what impact EN 202 will have, since students have been taking that course at various points in their curricula. Once we have sets of students who take EN 202 in the Fall of their sophomore year, we will better be able to determine the impact of the course on this goal.

6. L4 Scholarly Essay

By the time literature students graduate, they should be able to construct a professional-quality essay. If they cannot, they will be unable to function in a graduate program. At the same time, students have limited opportunities to develop near-professional writing. The committee recommends:

Develop a set of criteria that defines “near-professional, original work of literary research and scholarship.” Some criteria might include:

- A. Thorough familiarity with scholarship on the writer(s) or literary work(s)
- B. Thorough familiarity with the context(s) of the writer(s) or literary work(s)
- C. Language and mechanics appropriate for professional literary scholarship
- D. Strict conformity to MLA style
- E. Acknowledgment of methodology with appropriate research into that methodology

7. Evaluation Scoring

The committee determined that, although arbitrary and antithetical to education in the humanities, assigning a number to each of the colors would make multi-year comparisons easier and more meaningful. The Literature Team needs to determine how to proceed. The chair would like to move from a 3-point scale to a 5-point scale, since committee responses included ratings of “yellow approaching green,” which places the portfolio between the yellow and green rankings. This could be done by using decimal points, but moving to a 5-point scale might be less cumbersome. The Literature Team should discuss this early next term in preparation for the 2009 assessment.

Implementation of Strategies

The Literature Program has begun to implement some of the strategies mentioned in this and all previous reports. Because so few portfolios have been collected during the four-year process, large-scale changes to the program are unwise. However, some have been implemented. EN 105 does, indeed, now begin the portfolio process.

The assessment committee has now moved to a numerical evaluation. Because Millikin University as an institution insists on using the inadequate 3-point scale in its overall assessment, the Literature Program cannot, at this point, move to the better 5-point scale.

Programmatic change must be delayed for a number of reasons. First, many of the suggestions made in this and previous reports will need to involve a discussion of the full English Department, not just the literature program, since changes to be made to the goals, and by extension, the program, will impact all three English majors. As this report indicates, we do not have enough data from which to generalize, so making large-scale changes would be misinformed. Finally, the financial state of the University would make any programmatic changes dependent upon the financial health of the institution. At present, the turnover of faculty in the Department has placed several faculty lines in jeopardy. Because the Department must justify replacing faculty who have departed, we have no guarantee that any changes made to the program will be able to be implemented. The Literature Program desires to make meaningful changes to the curriculum, but if those changes cannot be implemented--as we are finding with the University-wide public speaking requirement--the quality of the changes would be compromised.