

HOW TO CONSTRUCT A SIMPLE, SENSIBLE, USEFUL DEPARTMENTAL ASSESSMENT PROCESS

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SO YOUR DEPARTMENT HAS BEEN TOLD it has to “do assessment.” Faculty response may be welcoming or at least open-minded, but perhaps also resentful, resigned, or hostile. How should you respond? Or perhaps you *have* an assessment plan, but

- You have been told it is not good enough; *or*
- It is good enough for the assessment people, but seems stupid and useless to most department members; *or*
- It is useful, but the workload it generates is killing you.

I have taught literature and writing in English departments both large and small, public and private, for over thirty years. In the mid-1990s I began to speak and write about “assessment,” because I was alarmed, as the national movement geared up, and I wanted to see this powerful new force turned for good, not harm, to higher education. By now I have consulted and led workshops at more than 400 institutions of higher education, on assessment, teaching and learning, or writing across the curriculum. I have written a book called *Assessment Clear and Simple*.

So in this essay, I want to integrate what I know about teaching literature with what I know about meeting requirements for assessment. I want to show departments how to construct an assessment system that is

- Consonant with the requirements of accreditation bodies, boards, legislatures, public education systems, or others who are requiring assessment;
- Consonant with the culture and values of the department;
- Useful to faculty and students;
- Manageable in terms of time, resources, expertise, effort, and work load;
- Respectful of appropriate faculty autonomy and academic freedom;
- *Not* used to punish faculty or make reappointment, promotion, or tenure decisions.

Beyond that, I want to address the question, “How might we assess our most ineffable goals—qualities of mind and heart that we most want the study of literature to nurture in our students?”

But first, the basics of assessment.

What Is Assessment?

Assessment is a national reform movement arising from public dissatisfaction with the perceived inability of undergraduate degree holders to read, write, and solve problems. The assumption is that higher education in America is broken, and that the way to fix it is to hold faculty and institutions responsible for assessing student learning. The assessment movement is exceptionally powerful because it has captured the accreditation process, which means the accreditors can make us do it. There are many questionable assumptions and potential dangers within the movement. When faculty are wary of assessment as a movement, I think they are doing their job.

But there is also good news. The accreditors define assessment as the systematic collection of information about student learning for the purpose of improving that learning. There is nothing necessarily demonic about that concept. When rightly done, assessment is actually a good idea. It’s so good we can’t not do it. Why would we spend so much time and energy trying to help students learn, and then not ask, “Is it working? Are our efforts paying off?” We have been doing assessment all along—not as well as we would wish, perhaps, and certainly not visibly enough for our constituents, but the essential task is to do assessment in a sensible way and then explain it clearly to those who need to know. And that sensible way, well explained, will suffice for the accreditors.

Most important, the accreditors leave to faculty the right to define their learning goals. So you can find your own ways to articulate the critical thinking, the aesthetic responsiveness, the reflection about meaning and values, the awe and self-loss, and the transforming experiences that you hope your students will take away. More about that later, when we get to stating learning goals.

Assessment and Grades

Meanwhile, a more prosaic question about assessment: the definition of assessment might lead you to say, “We give grades— isn’t that assessment?” Yes it is. However, the purpose of grades is to answer the question, “How well did Mary or Juan do on this assignment/test/course?” The audience for grades is future employers or graduate school admissions committees who need to know how well that student did. The accreditors are asking the department or program to evaluate the learning of its students as a whole, to answer the question, “What can we as a department do to enhance our students’ learning?” The department cannot answer that question simply by saying, “Majors graduated with an average GPA of 3.6 for courses in the major,” or “Senior grades on an essay of literary analysis averaged a B+.” Grades are too blunt an instrument for departmental assessment. They do not tell us what to work on.

Instead, we need a more fine-grained analysis that identifies strengths and weaknesses, the patterns of growth, or the emerging qualities we wish to nurture. Faculty conduct that type of analysis as we grade papers and exams, so we can use the grading *process* for assessment; we just have to push back down to the finer analysis the teacher has conducted, and we must draw conclusions, not about whether this student did well, but about how well the students did as a whole.

You might say, “Well, if students complete English 301, we know they have reached the goals, because that is what is required to pass the course.” But again, course pass rates do not tell you what to work on. Instead, you need, as a department, to know the qualities of your students as a group.

Many good departments, in fact, conduct this kind of group analysis, at least informally. If department coffee pots could talk, they would report over-hearing many statements that begin, “I wish our majors were better at....” Department meetings or curriculum revision committees often implement changes based on faculty perception of students’ strengths and weaknesses. We need to ensure that these processes are strong, and we need to explain them to the accreditors in language that fits the accreditors’ needs. I have seen many departments that were doing a better job of assessment than their written reports revealed.

The Three Steps of Assessment

Accreditors, no matter how many pages of guidelines they publish, require three steps of assessment:

1. Articulate goals for student learning in this format: at the end of this program, students will be able to....
2. Gather information about how well students are achieving the goals.
3. Use that information to inform decisions and actions.

Assessment for accreditors requires that you follow the three steps. It does *not* require that:

- You dumb down the curriculum, leave out your most important goals, or state only what is “measurable” in a narrow sense.
- You rely on “objective” or standardized tests.
- Everybody teach the same.
- The accreditor dictates your learning goals for students.
- You violate academic freedom.¹
- You use assessment information in personnel decisions such as reappointment or tenure.

Step One: Articulate Goals for Learning

The first step is for the department to ask, “What do we want our students to be able to do when they finish our undergraduate major/associate’s degree/doctoral program?” You do not need to worry about whether your

statements will be called “objectives” or “learning outcomes” or something else. Skip the jargon if you can. Just generate a list of things you want your students to be able to do. You will need a list of learning goals for each of your courses of study—the associate’s degree, undergraduate major literature track, writing track, and each graduate degree.

The statement of the goals should begin with “The student will be able to....” This is very important for your audience of accreditors. The purpose of the assessment movement is to get institutions of higher education to move from reciting what *they* do, toward inquiring whether *students learn* anything. So do not include statements such as “The department will offer ...” or “The student will be exposed to ...” or “The student will complete an internship.” In the following hypothetical example, drawn from a number of such statements I have seen, the department identifies program goals, not learning goals, even though the statements imply student learning.

Example: Inadequate Description of Learning Goals

The primary goals of the English program are to:

1. Teach effective writing;
2. Help students develop critical thinking and research skills;
3. Promote a broadened world view through the study of literature;
4. Foster collaborative learning.

The accreditor will think that the department doesn’t know the difference between focusing on what the department will do and focusing on whether the student learns anything from what the department does. So here are the same items, turned into “students will” statements.

Example: Revised Learning Goals, Still Very Broad

Students will:

1. Write effectively for a variety of audiences and purposes;
2. Demonstrate critical thinking and research skills;
3. Broaden their world view;
4. Collaborate effectively with other learners.

The goals above are now stated as student learning, but the goals are still broad. They could belong to the sociology or management department as well as English.

Here are some goals (again hypothetical, but drawn from my actual work with departments) that specifically mention literature, but they, too, are broad because of their verbs.

Example: Learning Goals with Vague Verbs

Students will:

1. Understand the role of literature in expressing and reflecting all aspects of human experience;
2. Understand the concerns and perspectives unique to literary traditions and artists;
3. Discover how literature can assist in understanding ourselves and the world around us;
4. Discover the joy and fun of reading, writing and discussing literature.

The accreditor would probably not jump on the department for these goal statements, but at some point, when the department begins to plan how to assess these goals, it would need to make the goals more specific. So ask, “What are the critical thinking and research skills needed in English, or in a particular track of English such as literature or writing?” Then articulate those skills. Or ask, “What will students do that will suggest they are broadening their world view or understanding themselves and the world around them?”

Here is a hypothetical list of learning goals for undergraduate literature majors, again developed from a number of such goal statements that various departments have shared with me.

Example: Learning Goals with More Specific Language

By the end of the undergraduate literature-track major, students will be able to:

1. Describe and analyze major literary works, literary themes, and trends from English, American, and at least one non-Western literary tradition.
2. Identify and analyze the cultural, sociological, ideological, historical, linguistic, and other aspects of works of literature. Discuss the ways in which literature is a product of its time and culture, but also how literature can transcend or critique its culture or break new ground.
3. Analyze and critique literary works, orally, in writing, and in discussion with others, using at least two theoretical/critical approaches, and employing tools of literary-critical analysis.
4. Discuss the complex role of writer and reader/viewer in the mutual creation and enactment of literary work.
5. Make aesthetic judgments about literature and support them.
6. Find, employ, and cite sources effectively.
7. Follow ethical principles of the discipline for collaborating with others and for using sources.

Most departments stick with a list such as the one above that include aspects of what I would call “critical thinking,” but not some of the more inef-fable qualities. But here is where I want to play at the edges. What if we were

to state our most ineffable goals and attempt to get some indication of whether our students were achieving them? Let me be clear—no accreditor will ever jump on you for not stating the most ineffable goals. They'll be happy with "critical thinking" or "literary analysis." But maybe you won't be satisfied. Maybe it would be good for your department to remind itself of these goals, work to articulate them, and get some indication about whether students are achieving them. So let's explore what could happen.

Articulating the Goals for Achieving the Ineffable

First, you need a language for stating the ineffable. I want to cite here several sources for such a language. I'll do so at some length—despite the danger that readers might be impatient—because this language feeds my teaching soul. I love to read it again, and I think other literature teachers do, too.

Here is the language from the call for proposals for this book:

[Students will] come to a new understanding of themselves, their world, and what might be a stake in the complex text before them. Such "sublime" experiences blur distinctions between subject and object; they can involve self-loss, awe and even humility in the face of that which is other and/or greater than the individual reader. Ideally, the study of literature draws students out of their quotidian concerns and into perspectives to which they would otherwise not have access, introducing them to forms of experience they would not otherwise encounter. (Heiland and Rosenthal)

Another wellspring from which we might draw language is the definition of "liberal learning" as shaped by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U):

A truly liberal education is one that prepares us to live responsible, productive, and creative lives in a dramatically changing world. It is an education that fosters a well-grounded intellectual resilience, a disposition toward lifelong learning, and an acceptance of responsibility for the ethical consequences of our ideas and actions. Liberal education requires that we understand the foundations of knowledge and inquiry about nature, culture and society; that we master core skills of perception, analysis, and expression; that we cultivate a respect for truth; that we recognize the importance of historical and cultural context; and that we explore connections among formal learning, citizenship, and service to our communities.... Because liberal learning aims to free us from the constraints of ignorance, sectarianism, and myopia, it prizes curiosity and seeks to expand the boundaries of human knowledge. By its nature, therefore, liberal learning is global and pluralistic. It embraces the diversity of ideas and experiences that char-

acterize the social, natural, and intellectual world. To acknowledge such diversity in all its forms is both an intellectual commitment and a social responsibility, for nothing less will equip us to understand our world and to pursue fruitful lives. (“Statement”)

Or use the language of a group of literary scholars under the aegis of the Modern Language Association which, supported by the Teagle Foundation, strove to articulate the relationship between literary study and the liberal arts:

Delving into other languages and learning to read complex literary texts rank among the most powerful means available for accomplishing [the] goals of liberal education and contributing to students’ personal and intellectual development....

Literary scholars explore how storytelling plays essential roles in all kinds of human comprehension. As students of literature learn about literary structure and form and the meanings of departures from established forms, they are acquiring the basic building blocks of understanding. At the same time, literature supplies an imaginative context through which readers gain insight into politics, history, society, emotion, and the interior life. Thus close reading of literary texts develops important analytic and interpretive skills that play central roles in complex human enterprises. What accomplished readers do with stories found in books—inhabit them, accept them provisionally as real, act according to their rules, tolerate their ambiguities, see their events from multiple and contradictory points of view, experience their bliss—informs what they can do with stories in the world at large. (4)

Or turn to the language of “big questions” as employed by the Teagle Foundation and others such as the National Endowment for the Humanities’ “Enduring Questions” grant program.

The Teagle Foundation has recently been probing into the big question of “Big Questions” in liberal education. We wanted to know whether a more direct engagement with the “Big Questions” would help invigorate students’ liberal education.... We haven’t tried to define those “Big Questions,” but we gave, as examples, such questions as “Who am I? What am I going to do with my life? What are my values? Is there such a thing as evil? What does it mean to be human? How can I understand suffering and death? What obligations do I have to others? What makes work, or a life, meaningful and satisfying?” We were also curious about shifting student attitudes (including their interest in religion and spirituality), about issues of value and meaning, and power and morality, and their place in undergraduate experience today—in the curriculum and beyond. (Connor)

How might we draw from this language to shape learning goals for literature majors? Here are two possibilities, submitted as possible additions to the seven goals listed earlier:

8. Students draw upon literature to contribute to their own search for meaning, their own engagement with the “big questions” of life and values—questions of life and death; good and evil; individual and society; power, transcendence, and virtue.
9. Students come to a new understanding of themselves, their world, and what might be at stake in the complex text before them. They dare to explore new ideas and literary experiences.

It’s bold to state goals 8 and 9. It’s not necessary for accreditation that you do so. You might not be able to get departmental agreement on any statement of such goals. But my point is that you *can* state these goals, and you *can* find ways to assess whether your students are reaching them. And doing so might be an incredibly rich and enlivening experience.

If the Department Cannot Agree on Goals

If the department cannot agree on a full set of goals, whether ordinary or ineffable, then generate a few goals you can agree on and move to Step Two—begin to collect information about how well students are meeting those goals. If disagreement or confusion about the goals is productive in helping the department clarify its mission and vision, then take the time to work through that discussion. But you should not let the department get bogged down in two years of bickering over the goals. In your report, you’ll say, “The department has agreed on this partial set of learning goals for its current assessment process. Further goals will be generated later.” The most important thing you can do, for yourselves and for the accreditors, is to show that you gathered some reasonable data and you acted on that information to make changes.

Step Two: Select Measures of Student Learning

Once you have a workable set of goals, you need to select what the assessment language calls “measures,” but what you can conceptualize as “indicators” of student learning.

Direct and Indirect Measures

One piece of jargon I think useful is the distinction between “direct” and “indirect” measures. A direct measure occurs when the student does something—writes a paper, takes an exam, participates in class discussion—and someone directly observes and evaluates that performance. Indirect is everything else. Indirect measures involve some leap of inference between the student’s performance and the evaluation: for example, you ask students or alumni what they *thought* they learned, or you track their placement into jobs or graduate school. One assumes that students got the job or were admitted to graduate school because they had learned, but that is a leap of inference.

Indirect measures can be very useful, but you will want to have, and accreditors will urge, a mix of direct and indirect measures.

The Basic, No-Frills System

The most basic, no-frills system calls for:

- One direct measure. The department examines at least a sample of students' classroom work toward the end of their course of study. This can be done in two ways:
 - The faculty teaching courses that enroll significant numbers of seniors may report students' strengths and weaknesses, based on the faculty members' analysis of students' classroom work.
 - And/or a separate group of faculty may analyze a sample of senior student work to identify strengths and weaknesses.

(A later section of this chapter gives more detail about how classroom work can be brought to the department for analysis and action.)

- One indirect measure. The department gathers information from students via a student survey or focus groups. You can ask these three questions:
 - For each learning goal, how well did you achieve this goal (very well, somewhat well, not very well, not at all)?
 - What aspects of the department's program, curriculum, courses, internships, or other activities in your major most helped you learn, and how did these things help (please be specific)?
 - What suggestions for improvement do you have in the department's program?

It is better to use two measures well than to proliferate measures you cannot use. Above all, do not list things in your reports that are not measures of learning for the program. For example, do not list the things you ask students to do (internship, senior research project) or assignments in a single course, *unless* the information about students' strengths and weaknesses is brought to the department or to a committee for program-level discussion and action.

Step Three: Use the Information for Improvement

I suggest that you hold one two-hour meeting each year, in which the department, or a relevant committee, examines whatever information you have about student learning in one of your programs—say the undergraduate major. If the data are incomplete or inadequate, hold the meeting anyway, and devote part of the meeting to discussing how to get better data.

By the end of the meeting, the department should identify one action item suggested by the data. For example, the data may suggest a number of

weaknesses in senior student work, but the department may choose to focus on one of them—helping students more effectively learn to employ more than one literary-critical lens or approach. Before the meeting ends, a person or small group is appointed to follow up. In the succeeding months, the department examines its curriculum to see where students are taught to use more than one literary-critical lens, where they are given practice and feedback, and where they develop the prerequisite skills they need.

Taking Action

Depending on what they find, departments will take action. The two most common actions are:

- Curricular change: for example, emphasizing a particular skill more fully in one or more courses, adding/dropping a course, changing prerequisites and requirements, or changing the sequence of courses.
- Faculty development: for example, a series of brownbag lunches for faculty to share how they help students recognize multiple literary-critical lenses, or how they encourage development of oral communication skills.

Details: Using Classroom Work for Departmental Assessment

For the direct measure, the department needs to look at a sample of student work, evaluate its strengths and weaknesses, and use that information for action at the department level. This is different from merely course-level grading of student papers, from which the individual course instructor can make improvements in how she or he teaches.

Begin with a sample of student work at the end of the course of study. Taking pre-post samples is more difficult than it sounds. It is better to start with an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of student work toward the end of the program, select something to work on, and then perhaps go back for further information about students' skills when they entered the program or when they completed the required American literature course.

If you have a capstone for the major and/or a thesis or exam for the master's degree and PhD, these become ideal sites for gathering samples of student work. If you have no capstone, or if your community college English department contributes to an associate's degree, you can take the work of students in two to three classes that enroll many or most of your students toward the end of their course of study. It is possible to take student work from a class that enrolls all levels, and extract only the work of seniors or students who have completed a specific number of credit hours, or students who have already taken a certain number of English courses.

This is *not* an exercise in judging a single teacher. Rather, select student work that encompasses skills and knowledge the students have developed throughout their course of study. The quality of this work is everyone's responsibility. The department works together as a team to address weaknesses and build on strengths.

Once you have a sample of student work, you need a way of analyzing it to identify strengths and weaknesses that the department can act on. There are two ways to get an analysis of students' strengths and weaknesses.

1. The instructor of the course conducts an analysis of students' strengths and weaknesses and reports to the department.
2. A group of department members analyzes a student work sample and reports to the department.

Either of these methods needs a set of criteria against which the instructor or the faculty readers can evaluate the student work. At minimum, the evaluators might work from a list of criteria related to the departmental learning goals. A more detailed mode of analysis uses a "rubric"—that is, a particular format for stating criteria and standards. In a rubric, the various traits of the work are evaluated separately, each with a scale from high-level work to low-level work. Fig. 1 is a rubric for literary-critical essays.

You'll see that it evaluates such qualities as complexity and originality. It deals intensively with critical thinking, as those skills appear in literary analysis. It would be sufficient for accreditation to use a rubric such as fig. 1 to evaluate a sample of senior student literary-critical essays. However, in these essays, students may or may not achieve some of the more ineffable qualities stated in goals 8 and 9 above.

So let's ratchet up a notch, and talk about how to collect student work that might indicate whether students are achieving the ineffable goals expressed in 8 and 9. Let's begin by looking at some student work that I believe exhibits some of the qualities expressed in Goals 8 and 9. It comes from my recent study of sixty-six highly effective teachers of introductory general education theology and religion classes at institutions both public and private (*Teaching and Learning*). Some of these faculty were experts at helping students address "big questions" without pushing students toward any particular stance or blurring the boundaries between academic and religious instruction. Here is part of a student's journal, from a public university general education course titled "Christianity and Cultures."² The journal, by a student who chose to remain anonymous but gave permission for use of his work, was written in response to viewing a film about South Africa's Reconciliation effort and its philosophy of "ubuntu." Let's ask whether the kinds of thinking reflected in this journal entry could be described as learning goals, and then assessed.

Ubuntu means: When you hurt others, you always hurt everyone, including yourself. Kant would call this a universal law, a law applicable at all times to all situations. The deontological nature (having morality in one's motives) of *Ubuntu* makes it interesting in that it is an internal quality and not a set of choices, and it seems that either people have it, or they don't. *Ubuntu* is the real point of the movie, and they actually are testing you in the context of the

	5	4	3	2	1
Thesis	The thesis of the paper is clear, complex, and challenging. It does not merely state the obvious or exactly repeat others' viewpoints, but creatively and thoughtfully opens up our thinking about the work.	The thesis is both clear and reasonably complex.	The thesis of the paper is clear. It takes a stand on a debatable issue, though the thesis may be unimaginative, largely a recapitulation of readings and class discussion, and/or fairly obvious.	Thesis is relevant to the assignment. It is discernible, but the reader has to work to understand it.	Thesis is irrelevant to the assignment and/or not discernible.
Complexity and Originality	The essay is unusually thoughtful, deep, creative, and far-reaching in its analysis. The writer explores the subject from various points of view, acknowledges alternative interpretations or literary-critical approaches, and recognizes the complexity of issues in literature and in life. Other works we have read and ideas we have discussed are integrated as relevant. The essay shows a curious and reflective mind at work.	The essay is thoughtful and extensive in its analysis. It acknowledges alternative interpretations/ approaches and recognizes complexity in literature and in life. Some other works are integrated as relevant.	The writer goes somewhat beyond merely paraphrasing someone else's point of view or repeating what was discussed in class. And/or the essay does not integrate other relevant works we have read.	Writer moves only marginally beyond merely paraphrasing someone else's point of view or repeats what was discussed in class.	The paper is mere paraphrase or repetition.
Organization and Coherence	The reader feels that the writer is in control of the direction and organization of the essay. The essay follows a logical line of reasoning to support its thesis and to deal with counter-evidence and alternative viewpoints. Sub-points are fashioned so as to open up the topic in the most effective way.	As for "5" but sub-points may not be fashioned to open up the topic in the most effective way.	The reader feels that the writer is in control of the direction and organization of the essay most of the time. The essay generally follows a logical line of reasoning to support its thesis.	The essay has some discernible main points.	The essay has no discernible plan of organization.
Evidence and Support	The writer's claims and interpretations are richly supported with evidence from the works we have read, secondary sources, and sensible reasoning. The writer assumes the reader has read the work and does not need the plot repeated, but the writer refers richly and often to the events and words of the literature to support his/her points.	As for "5" but the writer may briefly drop into mere plot summary.	The writer's claims and interpretations about the works are generally backed with at least some evidence from the works. The writer may briefly drop into mere plot summary.	The writer's claims are sometimes backed with evidence and/or the paper drops often into mere plot summary.	The paper is primarily plot summary.
Style	The language is clear, precise, and elegant. It achieves a scholarly tone without sounding pompous. It is the authentic voice of a curious mind at work, talking to other readers of the literary work.	The language is clear and precise.	The language is understandable throughout.	The language is sometimes confusing. Sentences do not track.	The language is often confusing. Sentences and paragraphs do not track.

	5	4	3	2	1
Sources	The essay integrates secondary sources smoothly. It quotes when the exact words of another author are important, and otherwise paraphrases. It does not just string together secondary sources, but uses them to support the writer's own thinking. Each source is identified in the text, with some statement about its author; there are no quotes just stuck into the text without explanation.	As for "5" but sources may occasionally be quoted with no contextual explanation. And/or writer may use direct quotation and paraphrase in less than optimal ways.	The essay does not just string together secondary sources, but uses them to support the writer's own thinking.	The essay strings together secondary sources.	There is no use of secondary sources.
Grammar and Punctuation	There are no discernible departures from Edited Standard Written English (ESWE).	There are a few departures from ESWE.	There are no more than an average of 2 departures from ESWE per page in the critical areas listed below.	There are more than 2 from ESWE per page in the critical areas listed below.	Some portion of the essay is impossible to read because of departures from ESWE.

Critical Areas:

- Spelling or typographical errors
- Sentence boundary punctuation (run-ons, comma splices, fused sentences, fragments)
- Use of apostrophe, -s, and -es
- Pronoun forms
- Pronoun agreement, and providing antecedents for pronouns
- Verb forms and subject-verb agreement
- Use of gender-neutral language
- Capitalization of proper nouns and of first words in the sentence

Fig. 1. Rubric for Evaluating Student Literary-Critical Essays, Barbara E. Walvoord, date unknown.

movie. They test you not on your critique of the confessors and aggressors or their victims or terrorists, but on your judgment of Anna Malon's affair with Langston Whitfield. I fell prey to this as I should have, but soon realized that my very judgment and scoffing at the fact that I could NEVER forgive a woman that cheated on me, was in fact a measurement of my *Ubuntu*. Earlier in the movie I was trying to reconcile the philosophy of *Ubuntu* with my own beliefs, and especially my ego, and decided that it may fit to some degree, but I was wrong. When confronted with the idea (and past experience) of a woman cheating on me, I felt hate and anger, and wanted to hurt the woman ... whom I am supposed to forgive. By understanding my level of *Ubuntu* I can better understand how they can forgive (but not forget) the atrocities committed in South Africa; and I also recognize that my *Ubuntu* is scarce, at least at this point in my life. This is the true point of the movie, to make us take account of our own *Ubuntu*.

What are the ineffable qualities of this journal that we might want to encourage in other students? The student is

- Relating the film to his own life, explaining the connections;
- Bringing in material (Kant, deontology) from another course or other reading to help him think about big questions;
- Reflecting an ongoing change in his thinking about the film, open to new ideas, new experiences, new directions;
- Analyzing the themes and purposes of the film in relation to the “big questions” it poses.

So how could we evaluate a sample of student journals? One simple option would be to take the four qualities above and simply look for their presence in the journals. Readers could identify whether the quality appeared at all, whether it appeared frequently and habitually over a number of journal entries, and/or whether it appeared in limited ways or more fully developed ways. Such an analysis would at least show the department what percentage of its senior students’ journals included these kinds of thinking.

To be more precise, we could we construct a rubric for these journal entries. Fig. 2 is one attempt.

Assignment: Journals are to record students’ reflections about how the literature relates to their own search for meaning and values, and the way in which the literature may help them enter new perspectives, new worlds.

Connecting Literature to “Big Questions” in Students’ Own Lives and Values; entertaining new perspectives and worldviews

1. Journal entries merely summarize/analyze the literature AND/OR merely reflect on the student’s struggle with “big questions” but make little or no explicit connection between the two.
2. Journal entries summarize/analyze the literature AND reflect students’ struggle with “big questions.” In at least one instance, the entry makes a connection between the two, but the connection is abbreviated, or it uses the literature in a simple way to draw “lessons” to apply to the student’s own life, or the student simply states that she agrees or disagrees.
3. One entry makes thoughtful links between the literature and the student’s own struggle with big questions. It recognizes the complexity both of the literary work and of the “big questions.” The journal entry reflects a willingness to entertain perspectives and understandings that are new to the student.
4. More than one entry does as in 3 above.
5. All of the entries do as in 3 above. The students’ musings are rich and deep, showing a thoughtful, reflective mind at work.

Fig. 2. Rubric for Journals in English Literature, Barbara E. Walvoord, date unknown.

A report to the department might show a table of rubric score averages, and/or it might be a prose analysis of students’ strengths and weaknesses.

This is my answer to the question we posed earlier about how to assess, and whether to assess, the ineffable values we often hold most dear. State those goals. Construct assignments that give you some indication of whether they are being achieved. State the criteria for assessing the assignment. Then examine student work. Such a system is not perfect. Readers will not necessarily

Learning Goals (as listed earlier, numbers 1-8)

Measure	Goals Addressed	How Information is Used
Senior student literary-critical essays in 3 classes that enroll seniors are evaluated by the instructors of those 3 courses. Instructors may use a rubric or they may write an evaluation of students' strengths and weaknesses in achieving the learning goals intended by the assignment.	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	Instructors report to the department at the annual assessment meeting. Department reviews the evidence and takes action as needed.
Annually, seniors enrolled in all classes are asked to complete a survey asking them how well they have achieved each of the learning goals, what aspects of the program helped them, and what suggestions they have for improvement.	1-9	Survey results are reported to the department at the annual assessment meeting, as above
Faculty teaching the required American Literature course require student journals or online discussion boards that ask students to apply literature to their own search for meaning and values. A sample of these journals are read and discussed each summer by the instructors of the course, who look for evidence of these kinds of learning, and who present an analysis to the department.	8, 9	Reader's report is presented to the department at the annual assessment meeting, as above.

Conclusion of the assessment report for accreditors who need to know that the department is doing assessment:

Examples of changes based on assessment data

- Three years ago, at the annual meeting, faculty decided to focus on senior students' difficulties in goal number 3, using varied theoretical and literary-critical approaches. An examination of the students' essays revealed several aspects to this problem. Two focus groups of students in two different senior-level courses provided further insights. The department examined its curriculum to identify classes where students were asked, within the same class, to apply two or more literary-critical approaches to a single piece of literature. The department then made changes in certain courses that would provide more instruction, practice, and feedback in that learning goal.

Alternate conclusion of the report for planning, budgeting and program review bodies that need to know what the department has most recently found and what are its plans and budgetary needs:

Conclusions and plans

The department, on the basis of its most recent assessment meeting, has decided to focus on students' ability to achieve goals 8 and 9. We plan to take the following action:

- Hold four soup & brown-bag lunches. At the first meeting, Professor Haswold will present a review of the literature on this topic, particularly the work of the Teagle Foundation and the current programs sponsored by the AAC&U. At the next meeting, Professor Kim Graham, of Anyville University, will speak to our department faculty about how to support students' search for meaning without violating church-state separation or our own academic and scholarly principles. At the third meeting, department members will share ideas with one another and examine strategies that seem to work in our own classrooms. At the final meeting, we will discuss possible implications for department-wide action.

– Cost:

- Soup and drinks for four lunches
- Honorarium and mileage to Professor Graham

Fig. 3. Sample Departmental Assessment Report, Barbara E. Walvoord, date unknown.

evaluate a student journal in the same way. You'll be aware that you are only viewing a whiff of smoke from the fire you hope burns within the student's heart. But it is something. It makes the department go beyond the groundless spinning of words, to ask, "Do we have *any* indication that students are achieving what we hope?" The ensuing faculty discussion, and the sharpened atten-

tion to these goals by individual faculty in their classrooms, may be the most valuable outcomes.

Reporting Your Assessment System

How does a department report its assessment system? Usually for two audiences:

- Accreditors and others who need to know *that the department is conducting assessment*.
- Administrators, budgeting and planning, and program reviewers who want to know *what the department found* and *what it plans to do* based on its assessment information.

Fig. 3 shows a sample report with two possible endings—one for each audience.

The sample report assumes the list of learning goals presented earlier, including the ineffable goals, numbers 8 and 9. It suggests some measures that might serve to indicate whether these goals were being achieved by students. It constructs some language by which the department might explain to outsiders what it does.

Conclusion

The point of this essay has been that assessment, while potentially dangerous, can be helpful and sustainable if it is done sensibly. The wise department needs just three things for assessment:

1. A set of learning goals (at the end of this program, students will be able to...).
2. Two measures that act as indicators of student learning:
 - a. A direct measure: examine a sample of student work toward the end of their course of study. Identify strengths and weaknesses.
 - b. An indirect measure: ask students what they thought they learned, what helped them learn, and their suggestions for improvement.
3. An annual meeting of two hours to consider the evidence about student learning and choose one item for action.

Within this system, a department can find ways to articulate its most ineffable goals for student learning and to gather indications about how well students are achieving them.

RESOURCES ON ASSESSMENT

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- Walvoord, Barbara E. *Assessment Clear and Simple: A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments, and General Education*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey, 2010. Print.
- Walvoord, Barbara E. and Virginia J. Anderson. *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment in College*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey, 2010. Print.

NOTES

- 1 For a definition of academic freedom, see Association of American Colleges and Universities, “Academic Freedom and Educational Responsibility.”
- 2 The course is described in *Teaching* 122-28.

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BIOGRAPHY

Barbara E. Walvoord has taught English composition and literature courses for more than thirty years. She was named the Maryland English Teacher of the Year for Higher Education in 1987. She has directed four writing across the curriculum or teaching/learning centers and has consulted or led faculty workshops at more than 350 institutions of higher education on topics of writing across the curriculum, teaching and learning, and assessment. She coordinated the University of Notre Dame’s reaccreditation self study in 2004. She

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