

Response to Senior Seminar Portfolios—Rob Hale Spring 2007

The objectives of the curriculum in English are to enable students to:

1. Demonstrate skills enumerated in the General Education “Language Rubric Communications Skills Goals,” with special reference to rhetorical development and organization strategies.
2. Understand and use process writing strategies in composing thesis-focused essays
3. Understand and use library resources for research papers.
4. Appreciate the special uses of language in literature; understand and appreciate figurative language and literary structures.
5. Read, explicate, analyze and interpret works of literature.
6. Recognize and appreciate literary genre and sub-genre distinctions, literary movements, critical approaches to texts, diverse cultural and historical literary traditions.
7. Understand and appreciate cultural, historical contexts in the study of English and American literatures.
8. Acquire a basic knowledge of the history of English, of traditional grammar and modern grammar theories.

After having read through the portfolios for senior seminar, I believe that the ten students submitting folders have achieved the departmental objectives at a satisfactory level with the exception of objective 8. While students have a basic knowledge of traditional grammar, I see no evidence that students have a basic knowledge of the history of English and that only a few of them who have taken English 201: Grammar have any background in modern grammar theories. As a department, we need to decide how important this objective is; if we think the history of English is an important part of our program, we need to decide when this material will be covered. Otherwise, we should revise this objective

I am also concerned about student' proficiency with objective 2, particularly in the area of revision. As I skimmed through several of the essays, I noticed that many students had written essays that I would consider good first drafts, but few students had taken the time to write a good first draft and then revise that paper into a truly excellent essay. One student confessed quite openly that she "lacked motivation to start a paper well before the due date." Even though we discuss the process writing approach extensively in English 110 and also in English 200, students rarely revise essays unless they are forced to do so. We need to consider pedagogical strategies that will encourage students to revise their work.

Another student commented that during his junior year, he entered a "junior year rut." I have observed this phenomenon as well, and some of the work students produced during the third year bears out this claim. After students have completed the surveys and English 200 during their sophomore years, they have much more freedom in the 300-level courses. Some students tend not to apply the lessons they learned in the surveys and English 200 and revert to old habits (for example, the failure to revise as described above).

Students claimed a clear understanding of literary movements, trends in literary

history, and genre distinctions, and their essay topics suggest particular proficiency in objectives 6 and 7.

One difficulty with using the portfolio model for assessment is that we base much of our data on self-reflection, which is not always reliable. In the future we may want to consider requiring a more rigorous final education-in process report in which they cite achievement of each departmental goal more fully.