

DANCE DEPARTMENT Assessment Report
Senior Capstone, Fall, 2012

Closing the Loop:

Since the implementation of the writing requirement in our Capstone course, we have seen a steady improvement in the cognitive, intellectual and communicative skills of our senior dance majors. The department has devoted a great deal of time and energy to the development of this course and have come to regard it as the singular most important place where we can assess the development of the dance major apart (but not exclusively) from their studio technique and performance skills. This course is a yearlong experience with the first semester devoted to analysis, the historical canon, aesthetics and choreographic theory, and to the development of the skills necessary to both discuss and write about these ideas. The second semester deals with the creative process as it pertains to either solo performance or the choreographic experience. It culminates in a fully produced concert for which the students are entirely responsible for all aspects of the performance from content to all practical matters including publicity, programs, etc. Because it is the only class that the entire full time faculty teaches as a team, we are able to establish an ideal opportunity for the discussion needed to form a proper assessment of the students. Each year the faculty has two intensive review sessions of the students, one at the end of each semester.

The course is designed to develop their ability to both speak and write about the art of dance and how it connects to higher learning and to their own lives as developing artists. Based upon our assessment of previous weaknesses in both writing and oral skills we have made some changes in the way we organize and present the course. We saw a **marked** improvement in both their written assignments and their final oral presentations. Here are some of the adjustments we made:

- The course is divided into four Modules, each dealing with a specific facet of choreographic focus as demonstrated by five to

seven masterworks. This semester we were more organized and intentional in the presentation and assessment of the materials within each module. This included more rubrics for each paper and more focused class discussion of the choreographic work viewed in each module. In addition, we succeeded in having the discussion posts completed ahead of time, which also contributed to more intelligent and well thought out class discussions.

- We developed more focused writing prompts for each Module assignment.
- We increased the difficulty and the amount of outside reading material (theoretical and critical review) at the very beginning of the semester, which enhanced their perspective when writing their papers.
- We reinforced the learning by including two major trips to see live performances of works being studied and researched. This allowed the students to see the material first hand and experience a greater depth of understanding that is often not possible to glean from videotape.
- We are familiarizing ourselves with Blackboard and are able to more easily navigate its functions.
- We substituted oral presentations for the culminating projects rather than a final paper. Previously, the only opportunity the students had for oral presentation was at Academic Festival. Our students had trouble with speaking about their work and communicating their ideas clearly. Having a final assignment that was based upon one of the four modules they had studied in the course with an additional component of research, gave the students the structure they needed to improve with regard to content and clarity.
- In recent years, because of communication with their peers, the trend has been for our students to approach the course with an increased awareness of the rigorous writing component. This has resulted in more well informed expectations of the class and better overall preparedness.

Each module was assigned to a team of faculty, which meant that every participating faculty member taught in at least two modules. The papers were divided and rotated among the faculty to ensure

that each of us was exposed to at least one paper from every student. We met periodically throughout the semester to discuss our progress and met for one two hour meeting at semester's end. Here is an example of one of the typical writing assignments:

In a 4-6 page paper, please answer/address the following questions/ideas, incorporating concepts from the readings as analytic tools.

How do you see those ideas reflected and manifested in the live experience of Einstein on the Beach, particularly with regard to time and space, collaboration and integration?

What do you determine were the important collaborative questions they solved so successfully?

Make sure to focus on two things: (1) your experience with the work as a live performance (2) YOUR understanding of the meta ideas at play in the opera, and the relationship of those ideas to your experience of the opera. Finally, please integrate at least two different readings; one from the assigned article, and one that you source yourself..

Rubric for Module 1 Paper: The New "Gesamtkunstwerk" - Total 10 points

- 1. Does the paper enfold ideas substantively from the readings in ways that reflect understanding of the concepts and that develop your ideas/responses to the live performance? (4 Points)***
- 2. Does the paper indicate a deeply thought out personal response to the material both written and performed? (4 Points)***
- 3. Is the paper written in prose that is error-free and appropriate in style and tone to the subjects? (2 Points)***

There was unanimous agreement that the work improved significantly. It is somewhat difficult to know exactly how much comes from our improvements and how much has to do with the particular cohort. Each year the double majors in English/Dance obviously have an easier time with their papers while the others usually need more help. We have made ourselves available for

coaching and many have turned to the Writing Center for help. I have the sense that the course expectations and restructuring definitely play a part in the improvement as we have always had roughly the same amount of differentiation in the other areas of their dual disciplines. The one grey area, which causes the dance faculty frustration, is the feedback we get from the students at the end of the course. It varies almost to an extreme depending on the group of students. When we have tried to make adjustments to address some of the student concerns we find that next year's cohort asks for things the previous group wanted less of. These are usually issues of whether or not they want more or less freedom when approaching their final paper, or the specific prompts for the shorter module papers they are assigned. I think we will stay the course for the next year and see if we are still reaping improved results. This will allow us to see whether we want to stay firm in our syllabus and ignore student input. The important thing is that we continue to see improvement in their intellectual and creative growth.

Implementing Changes:

Based on this semester's results, the department has identified the following changes we would like to begin to implement and then review:

- We are aware that we are not always as disciplined as we could be about introducing the early writing concepts that are part of our Writing in the Major plan in our courses such as Improvisation and Choreography I and II. These courses only meet twice per week at 1:20 minute segments and we are often struggling to complete the studio/creative work and the writing is the first thing to fall by the wayside. This semester (Spring 2013) Professors Mary Harney and Debra Fernandez have made an attempt to integrate the writing component into the Choreography I class in a way that will be more specifically targeted throughout the semester. We have identified a few different occasions, including visits by guest artists that will address the four categories we have determined to be relevant to writing about dance. Those are: descriptive (recording what they "see" in class as they observe dance studies) analytical (reviewing a professional concert) communicative (press

- releases, etc.) and personal journaling (creative process).
- Some of the feedback we received from students in the Capstone course that we felt was valuable dealt with certain organizational elements of the class. This had to do with the timing of the assignments in relation to the blackboard posts. For example, some students felt it would be more helpful to respond (via BB) to the discussion prompts for each Module after at least one class meeting rather than beforehand so that they could have some time to reflect on the in class discussion.
 - We are planning to have a Capstone retreat at the end of the spring semester to continue to analyze and discuss all the assignments and final projects.