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# Arts and Humanities General Education Assessment: A Qualitative Approach to Developing Program Objectives

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Assessing student learning has been an area of increased focus at the local, state, and national levels (Association of American Colleges and Universities & Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2008). Universities and colleges have had to respond to growing demands from a variety of stakeholders for evidence of quality instruction, programs, and services (Banta, Lund, Black, & Oblander, 1996; Barrie, Ginns, & Prossner, 2005; Ewell, 2007; Shulman, 2007). This movement in educational accountability has influenced both curriculum reform and assessment of general education programs (Awbrey, 2005; Bers, 2000; Reynolds et al., 1998). Faculty and administrators have increasingly had to engage in critical conversations not only about the purposes of the general education program and its impact on student learning and development (Palomba & Banta, 1999) but also about the quality of assessment practices. No one general education area has the potential to be influenced by these efforts so much as the arts and humanities.

In the public debate surrounding the arts and humanities in general, some have questioned whether, with the rising costs of obtaining a college education, diminishing budgets, and comparatively lower economic returns (Poovey, 2001), general education in the arts and humanities is truly adding value. Moreover, some have questioned whether the arts and humanities still fit within the

general education framework (Anderson, 2002). In many ways the accountability movement has raised the stakes for the academic programs not only in addressing student learning and development in both the cognitive and affective domains but also in providing evidence that these learning outcomes are being achieved.

The development of program-level learning objectives is a critical first step in the process of gathering this evidence—the assessment process (Allen, 2004; Palomba & Banta, 1999). Unlike the case in other content areas or academic disciplines, there are no professional standards for general education in the arts and humanities to inform assessment practice. Compounding the problem of a paucity of guidelines is the fact that there is a wide range of disciplines, curricula, and learning outcome expectations represented in the arts and humanities. So then, how should faculty in the general education program for the arts and humanities develop learning objectives that (a) reflect *all* of the courses in the program (i.e., students will have equal opportunity to meet those objectives), (b) support the overall mission of the general education program, and (c) maintain the values and expectations of the core disciplines? Arguably, the task of identifying learning outcomes in general education is more challenging for the arts and humanities than for other academic areas because of the breadth and abstract nature of the core programs (Anderson, 2002; Bers, 2000). This study presents one method for addressing this challenge.

## Background and Purpose

Identifying core learning objectives that address a diverse grouping of courses was the task for arts and humanities general education faculty at a midsize, mid-Atlantic university. This task was motivated by a change in the structure of course requirements in the arts and humanities.

The original structure of the general education curriculum related to the arts and humanities consisted of four sets of courses, each of which was designed to form a conceptually cohesive “package.” Each package presented an experience in which the three required courses were interrelated by a common theme. Program learning objectives were based on learning outcomes common across the packages; that is, regardless of the package chosen, a student would have the same opportunity to master the program-level objectives. An example of one of these packages was “American Identities,” for which students would take a humanities course entitled “Questions of American Identity”; a music course, “Music in America”; and an American literature survey course. Students were instructed as to the order in which the three courses within their chosen package were to be taken.

In 2001, faculty on the coordinating committee formally reviewed the general education curriculum in the arts and humanities and decided to change the structure of course requirements to a distributional system; the resulting structure is presented in the appendix. Under the new system, courses are grouped into three focus areas or “tiers.” A student must take one course (three hours) from each of the three tiers, for a total of nine hours; however, the student can freely choose which course to take from within each tier. Thus, to meet the requirements for general education in the arts and humanities, a student must choose one course (out of nine options) in the “Historical, Cultural, and Philosophical Perspectives” tier, one course (out of seven options) in the “Fine Arts” tier, and one course (out of seven options) in the “Literature” tier.

Prima facie, one might think that program-level learning objectives based on the package system would be portable to the distributional system, particularly since the course offerings were largely the same. However, the new system no longer provided the framework within which the interrelated learning outcomes across tiers would be met by all students. Conceptually, a student should be able to enroll in any combination of courses across the tiers and meet the objectives for the arts and humanities area. Unfortunately, this ideal vision was not realized in practice. For example, in the Fine Arts tier, a student can choose from courses such as “Music in America,” “Survey of World Art,” and “Introduction to Theatre,” courses that seemingly have few content linkages. Thus the mismatch between the existing objectives and the new distributional structure arose from the fact that these objectives assumed a clear, unifying structure across specified sets of courses. Within the new system, student learning objectives needed to express expectations of broader cognitive and affective development, objectives that could be met regardless of the specific courses a student selected.

The reorganization of the general education program and resulting incongruence between the learning objectives and the specific courses available within the arts and humanities area were the catalyst to a series of conversations within the faculty coordinating committee about approaches to addressing these programmatic issues (M. Mulrooney, personal communication, June 19, 2006). These conversations centered on two key issues: (1) interdisciplinary linkages through common learning expectations and (2) assessment. Faculty agreed that the interdisciplinary linkages reflecting arts and humanities general education goals had disappeared after the course structure reorganization. Courses that were once linked on conceptual grounds, and by virtue of common learning outcomes, were found to be conceptually disjointed. Thus, the collective impact of the arts and humanities general education program on students was reduced in this new system, at least when evaluated according to the existing objectives. The fact the courses were no longer bound by common

learning objectives, in turn, affected assessment. Faculty concluded that some elements in the assessment “loop” were misaligned. As such, assessment data were no longer useful for program and instructional improvement.

The primary task at hand, then, was to develop program-level arts and humanities general education objectives in a way that met the following criteria: (a) *realigned* top-level expectations with the new distributional course structure, (b) *reestablished* interdisciplinary linkages among courses to broader arts and humanities general education goals, and (c) established a stronger basis for adoption of proposed objectives by a diverse group of faculty members. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to identify the common learning outcomes across general education courses in the arts and humanities through an examination of course objectives.

The motivating goal for this research was threefold. The first goal was to develop program-wide objectives from the “bottom up” using course syllabi; these objectives needed to align with the new distributional structure of the arts and humanities general education framework. In other words, objectives needed to focus on core learning outcomes such that any student enrolled in any course within the tier structure could achieve these expectations.

Second, these new objectives needed to be expressed in a way that accurately represented the values and expectations of *all* faculty teaching arts and humanities general education courses. That is, the method of extracting objective statements from the course materials (i.e., syllabi) needed to be rigorous and transparent. The rationale for following this process was that the likelihood of faculty adoption of the new objectives would be greater if they reflected a broader perspective than if they were developed by a committee of only one or two faculty members.

Finally, the objectives needed to represent the shared objectives for instruction across multiple disciplines. With the large number of disciplines represented in the arts and humanities, whose related objectives are often abstract and intangible, the process of articulating *common, measurable* learning objectives presents a challenge.

## Conceptual Framework

Assessment professionals agree that faculty input is essential to any type of effort to develop learning goals and objectives (Allen, 2004; Sundre, 2006). More importantly, faculty should be viewed as actors in the assessment process rather than those who are acted upon. There are two general approaches to developing objectives: the first begins with analysis of existing course materials, and the second begins with discussions by a small faculty committee. Using the first approach, goals and objectives can be extracted by reviewing program course

materials (e.g., syllabi) for “explicit or implicit expectations for knowledge, skills, and values that students are expected to develop” (Allen, 2004, p. 33). Analysis of course goals and learning objectives can produce useful information about what faculty value in student learning—values that can sometimes be lost through a small-group-based process of developing objectives. Faculty, thus, are more likely to take ownership of or adopt objectives that represent their expectations of learning.

The alternative approach would involve engaging faculty in the objective writing process by appointing a small group to draft learning goals and objectives and then present to the faculty at large for discussion (Allen, 2004). On the one hand, this approach initially involves only a few faculty members, and thus the development process can be managed easily and efficiently. On the other hand, this process is subject to group member attrition and group bias. Depending on the depth and breadth of the program, the workload may be too much for one small group, and depending on the representativeness of the small group, the draft objectives may not represent *all* faculty values and expectations. Thus we chose the first approach, analyzing course documents, in order to maximize the degree to which the program-level objectives represented the full set of courses in the program, to maximize the number of “voices” contributing to the process, and to minimize the burden on individual faculty members.

## Method

The purpose of this study was to explore themes across the general education courses in the arts and humanities to help articulate a set of shared objectives. Content analysis with thematic networks emerged as the most appropriate method for organizing themes and exploring meanings of text in this study (Attride-Stirling, 2001). This analytic approach draws on the aspects of commonly used qualitative approaches to investigate trends and patterns (Stemler, 2001) and develop meanings of text (e.g., argumentation theory, grounded theory, semantic mapping). The strength of the thematic network as an analytic tool is that it allows the researcher to reduce textual data into “web-like” networks and create global linkages among basic and organizing themes more efficiently (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The process of developing meaning is thus more transparent.

## Materials and Procedure

The syllabus was chosen as the primary document for analysis. Syllabi generally contain vital information about what faculty value in instruction and the

kinds of learning outcomes assessed at the course level. A total of 128 syllabi representing each course in the arts and humanities general education program from three consecutive semesters (spring 2005, fall 2005, and spring 2006) were collected for the analysis. For the purposes of this study, the individual course objective was the unit of analysis. If a single course objective represented several dimensions (e.g., appreciation and critical thinking), the objective was split into several discrete outcome statements.

If the learning objectives were either explicitly (i.e., “student will be able to . . .”) or implicitly stated, then the syllabus was included in the analysis. Of the 128 syllabi submitted, thirty-four duplicate syllabi were excluded from the analysis, thus resulting in a final set of ninety-four syllabi.

As mentioned, content analysis with thematic networks was used to explore the data. There are six steps involved in creating thematic networks: (a) coding, (b) identifying themes (basic, organizing, and global), (c) constructing the networks, (d) describing and exploring thematic networks, (e) summarizing the networks, and (f) interpreting patterns (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The extent to which thematic networks has been used in the analysis of syllabi has not been documented in the literature.

## General Coding Procedure

Before identifying themes and examining the thematic networks, the data had to first be coded. Therefore, the first phase of the content analysis was divided into four tasks: (a) develop codes, (b) code objectives, (c) establish agreement, and (d) organize objectives by codes. Coding can be approached using either an *a priori* or an emergent framework. Some researchers recommend that the identification of codes should occur before observation begins (e.g., Neuendorf, 2002). However, other qualitative researchers, particularly grounded theorists, support the process of emergent coding because it allows the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the text through an iterative process of initial coding, review, and revision (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). As there was no existing theory regarding general education outcomes in the arts and humanities, there were no *a priori* codes used for this study. Furthermore, as the purpose of our study was exploratory, rather than confirmatory (Bernard, 2006), the emergent coding approach was deemed most appropriate.

## Developing Codes

The group of coders for this study comprised one faculty member and two graduate students. Two additional students participated in the first stage of syllabi

processing, formulating the initial ideas for coding. They did not, however, participate in any other phases of analysis.

We first independently reviewed a subset of the syllabi to get a sense of the general ideas contained. This resulted in a conversation that yielded an initial set of concepts. Each of us then went back through the syllabi and came up with an initial set of codes. After discussion and further definition, we developed an initial coding framework. Each of us used this framework to classify the course objectives. After an additional iteration of applying the codes, we made final revisions to the coding framework. We then independently coded each objective and calculated intercoder reliability. We came to consensus on coding for all objectives before beginning the process of creating the thematic network.

## Identifying Themes

Following the completion of coding, the objectives were grouped together by codes. We then identified basic, organizing, and global themes across these groups of coded objectives. Basic themes are statements about the textual data that describe the general characteristics of those data. These themes hold little meaning until they are clustered into organizing themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Organizing themes, therefore, capture the underlying features among the basic themes and represent the higher-level concepts common across basic themes. Global themes are those top-level categories that summarize and provide an interpretation of the organizing themes. More specifically, “global themes group sets of organizing themes that together present an argument, or a position or an assertion about a given issue or reality” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 389).

After the themes were identified, we used semantic mapping, or concept mapping, to construct, explore, and interpret the thematic networks (see Figure 1; Neuendorf, 2002). Specifically, multirelational semantic mapping was used to demonstrate interactions between and among thematic levels (Lambiotte, Dansereau, Cross, & Reynolds, 1989).

## Results

### Coding

Definitions were developed for each code, and codes were refined to deal with ambiguities or combined when there was overlap. The final coding framework is presented in Table 1.

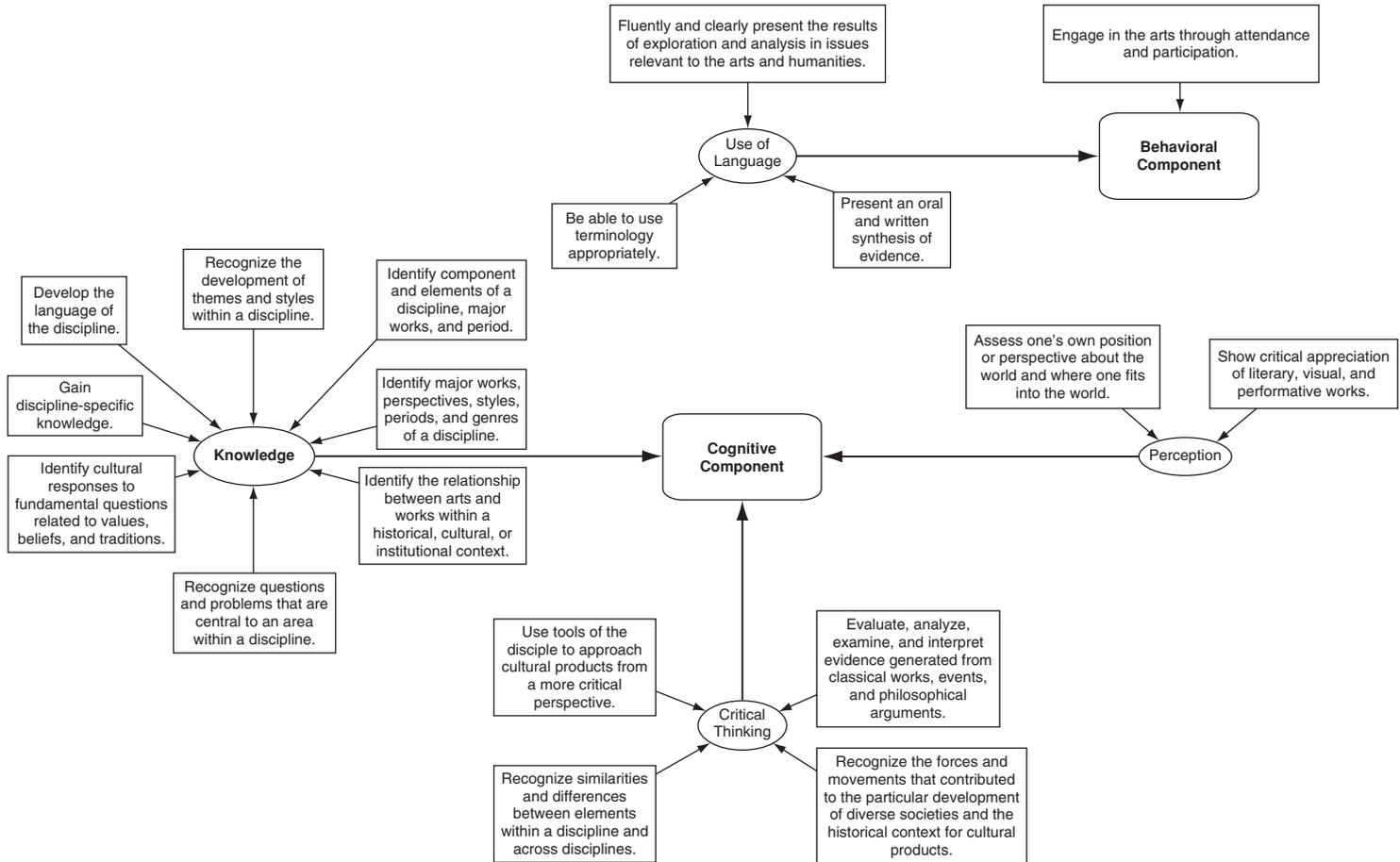


FIGURE 1 Thematic network of learning outcomes in arts and humanities general education.

**TABLE 1** Coding Framework

Code	Description
Appreciation	Appreciation of literary, visual, and performative works (artistic expression).
Critical Thinking/Critical Analysis	Being able to develop and analyze arguments (internal and external); ask critical questions of the discipline, the world, and the self. Use perceptual skills, examine and interpret works. Synthesize information from multiple programs of study in order to identify differences and similarities and build conceptualization of the discipline as a whole. Address problems by selecting and creating solutions.
History/Historical	Recognizing pivotal historical issues that face(d) culture and the issues and conflicts that have shaped it. Historical context of a culture. Recognizing events that caused transitions in the discipline.
Interaction/Interconnection	Interrelationship among the arts, relationships between cultures, students interacting with other cultures. Engaging in cocurricular activities that would develop knowledge of the cultures.
Key Concepts	Be able to identify the critical (core) issues in the discipline. Develop the language of the discipline. Be able to use terminology characteristic of the discipline.
Communication Skills	Provide written or oral synthesis of information.
Situatenedness	Relationship within a period (e.g., a piece of music was influenced by and influenced the culture).
Values and Beliefs	Assessing the philosophical perspective of the period/genre. Assessing one's own philosophical position about the world and where one "fits" into the world. Development of personal values and beliefs.

We found it useful to divide the codes into superordinate and subordinate codes. For example, *key concepts* was designated as a superordinate code, and subsumed under *key concepts* were five subordinate codes. Any phrase or segment that could not be captured by a subordinate code was assigned to the superordinate code. Table 2 presents information about each of the superordinate and subordinate codes, along with the number of objectives within each tier that were assigned each code.

TABLE 2 Superordinate and Subordinate Codes and Frequency Used by Tier

Superordinate Code	Subordinate Code	Tier 1: Historical, Cultural, and Philosophical Perspectives		Tier 2: Fine Arts		Tier 3: Literature	
		No. of Objectives	(% of Tier 1 Total)	No. of Objectives	(% of Tier 2 Total)	No. of Objectives	(% of Tier 3 Total)
Appreciation		5	(5)	10	(8)	4	(8)
Communication Skills		5	(5)	2	(2)	—	
	Written Communication	1	(1)	5	(4)	1	(2)
Critical Thinking		32	(30)	24	(20)	6	(13)
	Compare/Contrast	—		3	(3)	—	
	Methods	7	(7)	6	(5)	8	(17)
History		—		—		—	
	Issues and Conflicts	2	(2)	—		1	(2)
	Historical	14	(13)	4	(3)	5	(10)
Interconnection		10	(10)	8	(7)	5	(10)
	Participation	—		6	(5)	—	

Key Concepts		8	(8)	13	(11)	5	(10)
	Major Developments	—		2	(2)	2	(4)
	Core Issues	7	(7)	2	(2)	—	
	Components/ Elements	1	(1)	5	(4)	1	(2)
	Major Works	2	(2)	14	(12)	3	(6)
	Vocabulary	4	(4)	—		—	
Situatedness		5	(5)	14	(12)	3	(6)
Values and Beliefs		4	(4)	—		1	(2)
	Worldview	4	(4)	—		3	(6)
Total		106	(100)	118	(100)	48	(100)

## Coding Objectives and Intercoder Reliability

After discussing and revising the codes into eight superordinate and twelve subordinate codes, we independently coded each course objective across the ninety-four syllabi. To ensure that we were conceptualizing the codes in the same manner, two measures of agreement were computed for the first iteration of coding. Because three of us participated in the coding process, intercoder reliability was assessed for pairs of researchers: (a) Coder 1 and Coder 2, (b) Coder 1 and Coder 3, and (c) Coder 2 and Coder 3. Intercoder reliability was first calculated using proportion of exact agreement for each objective. This was used to identify objectives for which there was disagreement among the raters in the code assigned. Percent agreement for the three pairs of coders ranged from 70 to 73 percent. Cohen's kappa (Cohen, 1960) was used as a *global* measure of intercoder reliability across all objectives. Kappa values range from 0 to 1; a kappa value of 0 indicates that the coders did not agree above and beyond what would be expected by chance (Stemler, 2001). Because contingency tables used in computing Cohen's kappa only allow for two coders, kappa was computed for each *pair* of raters. The kappa coefficient ranged from 0.61 to 0.66 (see Table 3). Kappa values between 0.61 and 0.80 indicate substantial agreement beyond chance (Landis & Koch, 1977; Neuendorf, 2002). Kappa values obtained for this study provided sufficient evidence that we were applying the codes to the objectives in a similar manner.

We came together for a final round to reach consensus on individual objectives for which there was less than two-thirds agreement between coders. After removing thirteen duplicate objectives and splitting several more into discrete outcome statements, a total of 272 objectives or phrases were categorized according to the revised coding system.

When examining the distribution of coded objectives across the course groupings, Tiers 1 (Historical, Cultural, and Philosophical Perspectives) and 2 (Fine Arts) contributed to 39 and 50 percent of all objectives coded, respectively. Thus, the contribution made by Tier 3 courses to the resulting program objectives was less than that of the other two tiers. Analysis of objectives coded

TABLE 3 Intercoder Reliability

Coder Pair	Proportion Exact Agreement	Cohen's Kappa
1 and 2	.70	.63
1 and 3	.70	.61
2 and 3	.73	.66

NOTE: Three researchers participated in coding the objectives. Contingency tables used in computing Cohen's kappa only allow for two coders.

with the revised codes revealed that 22 percent of the objectives were focused on critical thinking or a critical thinking subordinate code (see Table 2). *Key concepts* was the second-most frequently used code, particularly for Tier 2 objectives, 31 percent of which were coded as *key concepts*. The superordinate code *History* was not used to code any of the objectives in the sample (thus the total number of codes used was 19).

## Thematic Network

Three levels of themes (i.e., basic, organizing, and global) were constructed from the coded objectives. Themes at each level captured the salient expectations of learning expressed in the objectives. The three levels of themes and their relationships with one another are represented in Figure 1.

*Basic Themes.* As presented in Table 4, nineteen basic themes were constructed from the coded objectives. For example, nineteen course objectives were coded as *appreciation*. The basic theme represented by this code was conceptualized as the expectation that, as a result of their experience in the class, students would be able to appreciate or have an affective response to some aspect of culture (e.g., literature). A sample of the objectives that were coded as *appreciation* and categorized within this basic theme is presented below:

- Objective:* Respond to the emotive, expressive, and formal content of artistic and literary works in a personal and informed way.
- Objective:* The student will understand and appreciate the collaborative nature of theatre as an art form.
- Objective:* Become more attentive and appreciative readers of poetry: receptive to its pleasures, alert to the beauty and power of language in ordering and reflecting our feelings and experiences.
- Objective:* Students completing this course will also have sharpened their ability to . . . have a greater appreciation of the whole of the American identity.

The objectives seemed to communicate a basic theme: students will *show critical appreciation of the human experience through the study of literary, visual, and performative work* as a result of course instruction. Again, basic themes describe the general characteristics of coded data.

*Organizing Themes.* Organizing themes capture the underlying dimensions of the basic themes. They address the higher-level concepts across those basic

**TABLE 4** Basic Themes

#	Theme
1	Show critical appreciation of the human experience through the study of literary, visual, and performative work.
2	Recognize similarities and differences between elements within a discipline and across disciplines.
3	Use tools and methods of the discipline to approach cultural products from a more critical perspective.
4	Evaluate, analyze, examine, and interpret evidence generated from classical works, events, and philosophical arguments.
5	Examine the ebb and flow of accommodation and resistance. Examine how leaders and participants of subgroups responded to issues and conflicts with society.
6	Recognize the forces and movements that contributed to the particular development of diverse societies and the historical context for cultural products.
7	Engage in the arts through attendance and participation.
8	Identify and analyze the interplay of historical, literary, artistic, and religious forces on an entire culture.
9	Identify the development of themes and styles within a discipline.
10	Identify the questions and problems that are central to an area within a discipline.
11	Identify components and elements of a discipline, major works, and period.
12	Identify major works, perspectives, periods, and genres of a discipline.
13	Be able to use terminology appropriately. Develop the language of the discipline.
14	Gain discipline-specific knowledge.
15	Fluently and clearly present the results of exploration and analysis of the arts and humanities in written format.
16	Present an oral and written synthesis of evidence.
17	Identify the relationship of arts and works within a historical, cultural, or institutional context.
18	Assess one's own position or perspective about the world and where one fits in the world.
19	Examine cultural responses to fundamental questions related to values, beliefs, and traditions.

themes. The nineteen basic themes were categorized into four organizing themes or expected domains of cognitive and affective development: *perception*, *critical thinking*, *knowledge*, and *use of language*.

The organizing theme *perception* was defined as a student's internal framework for evaluating and making meaning of the world. *Perception* contained two basic themes:

*Basic Theme:* Assessing one's own position or perspective about the world and where one fits in the world. (This represented the superordinate code "Values and Beliefs" and the subordinate code "Worldview.")

*Basic Theme:* Show critical appreciation of the human experience through literary, visual, and performative works. (This represented the superordinate code "Appreciation.")

This organizing theme represented the expectation that students would (a) develop their own and become aware of others' worldviews and (b) be able to appreciate human significance as manifested through cultural products. In other words, students would have a keener view and valuation of other cultures and works emanating from these cultures as a result of their experience in the course.

The organizing theme *critical thinking* contained the most frequently used codes (i.e., critical thinking and its subordinate codes). The basic themes in this category expressed the expectation that students will be able to evaluate relationships between elements within and across disciplines:

*Basic Theme:* Recognize the forces that contributed to the particular development of diverse societies and the historical context for cultural products. (This represented the superordinate code "History" and the subordinate code "Issues and Conflicts.")

*Basic Theme:* Evaluate, analyze, examine, and interpret evidence generated from classical works, events, and philosophical arguments. (This represented the superordinate code "Critical Thinking.")

*Basic Theme:* Use tools of the discipline to approach cultural products from a more critical perspective. (This represented the superordinate code "Critical Thinking" and the subordinate code "Methods.")

*Basic Theme:* Recognize similarities and differences between elements within a discipline and across disciplines. (This represented the superordinate code "Critical Thinking" and the subordinate code "Compare/Contrast.")

Eight basic themes were aimed at building knowledge competencies, or *key concepts*, that included vocabulary of the discipline, core issues central to the disciplines, and major works. A sample of these themes is presented below:

*Basic Theme:* Identify questions and problems central to a program within a discipline. (This represented the superordinate code “Key Concepts” and the subordinate code “Core Issues.”)

*Basic Theme:* Examine cultural responses to fundamental questions related to values, beliefs, and traditions. (This represented the superordinate code “Values and Beliefs.”)

These basic themes addressed the *knowledge* component of learning and development across the courses, thus constituting the organizing theme *key concepts*.

In addition to developing students’ knowledge, critical thinking, and perceptual skills, the objectives also indicated that students should develop in their ability to *use language* characteristic of the disciplines in the arts and humanities. This organizing theme related to oral and written communication competency. Faculty expected students to leave their courses with the ability to clearly communicate to an audience their experience or exploration in the arts and humanities. The basic themes subsumed under this category were the following:

*Basic Theme:* Present an oral and written synthesis of evidence. (This represented the superordinate code “Communication Skills.”)

*Basic Theme:* Fluently and clearly present, in written format, the result of exploration and analysis in issues relevant to the arts and humanities. (This represented the superordinate code “Communication Skills” and the subordinate code “Written Communication.”)

*Basic Theme:* Be able to use terminology appropriately. (This represented the superordinate code “Key Concepts” and the subordinate code “Vocabulary.”)

*Global Themes.* Global themes serve to integrate concepts found across organizing themes. Two global themes seemed to best summarize the organizing themes in this data set. A distinct set of organizing themes more aptly addressed the *cognitive dimension of development* (i.e., what the students will know and how they will think as a result of course instruction). Subsumed under the cognitive development global theme were three organizing themes: *perception*, *critical thinking*, and *knowledge*.

A second global theme addressed the *behavioral dimension of development* resulting from course instruction (i.e., what the student will be able to *do* as a function of course instruction). This theme contained one organizing theme and a basic theme that was not assigned to an organizing theme: *engaging in the arts through attendance and participation* (basic theme) and *use of language* (organizing theme).

## Exploring the Thematic Network

The thematic network was then constructed as a semantic map, a tool often used for visually representing knowledge structures (Lambiotte et al., 1989). Although the coding process stipulated that each code be mutually exclusive, mapping provided a way to illustrate how a top-level theme was derived from related lower-level themes. As shown in the map of the thematic network (see Figure 1), the organizing theme *critical thinking* had a direct connection to the four identified basic themes and an indirect connection to two basic themes assigned to the organizing theme *use language*. For example, critical thinking development is essential if students are to *fluently and clearly present, in written format, the results of exploration and analysis in issues relevant to the arts and humanities*. Use of this type of mapping strategy helped to identify interactions and dynamic relationships in the data. The thematic network shown in Figure 1 would need to be reviewed by arts and humanities faculty for validation, as the connections are based on our interpretation of the data.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the core learning outcomes of arts and humanities general education at one university and to fill an important gap in the assessment literature. The conceptual framework and method used to conduct this research reflect several important virtues of the assessment process: for example, (a) it was iterative (Wehlburg, 2007); (b) it was a shared effort (Palomba & Banta, 1999); (c) it provided an opportunity for deep reflection (Musin, 2007); and (d) it utilized the diverse perspectives of professionals to gain a stronger, more holistic view of the impact of arts and humanities general education. The results of this research have provided insight into the cognitive and affective attributes that underlie instruction and expectations for learning in general education in the arts and humanities.

Overall, it appears that the expectations of faculty, as represented by course objectives, are that students will experience cognitive *and* personal development. Faculty set objectives that address not only what the students should know after

the general education experience but also what they should be able to *do* (e.g., be able to use terminology appropriately). Clearly faculty most highly value critical thinking as a learning outcome, as shown in the frequency of critical thinking codes used. Additionally, we conclude that the general education program in the arts and humanities at this particular university is designed to expose students to aspects of the evolution of cultures and the works that have been produced throughout time within cultures. It is also concerned with developing in students a greater self-awareness with respect to their cultural environment and engendering within them a greater appreciation for their own and others' cultures.

When attempting to translate these program expectations into an assessment plan, each theme level serves a different purpose. Basic themes become the building blocks for program-level objectives. Organizing and global themes express the general components embodied in the basic themes and thus point toward the types of assessment tools best suited to measuring the objectives. For example, objectives within the *behavioral* global theme may be best measured through the use of performance assessment. Now, the next step for this university is to provide *evidence*, through assessment, that students have met the program expectations.

## Directions for Future Research

Interpretations made within this study are ours, not those of faculty members who teach within the general education program in the arts and humanities. Thus, it is important to note that the impact of these methods on faculty buy in has not yet been validated; this is the next stage of the research. However, there are some key elements about this study that support the notion that methods and objectives presented here, while emanating from a group of researchers, have great potential for adoption by faculty. The objectives represent the language and essence of arts and humanities pedagogy; they were developed from a faculty-generated product, the syllabus. Efforts in this study have made instructional objectives across general education courses in the arts and humanities more accessible to internal and external stakeholders, more cohesive, and more transparent. In doing so, we helped to identify the expectations that are currently upheld program-wide and the gaps that may need to be addressed.

Content analysis of objectives is an iterative process, particularly for a general education program as diverse as the arts and humanities. Thus, the next step in this effort is to validate the inferences (i.e., themes) we have made about course objectives. The literature suggests that one method of validity checking is to submit the findings to members of the stakeholder group for review (Janesick, 2000). In our case this would be the faculty who teach in the arts and humanities general education program. Through member checking, we would

gather evidence for the validity of the codes, their application to the objectives, and the construction and interpretations of the thematic networks (Neuendorf, 2002). This might involve an exercise in which faculty are asked to select the theme they believe best describes a particular objective. Future research will also include a comparative analysis of the themes to the current objectives in the arts and humanities general education program. The findings could provide empirical support for the misalignment between program expectations and the expectations of faculty teaching in the program.

## Conclusions

The results of this study provide support for the use of qualitative approaches in facilitating the development of program objectives for general education. As demonstrated in this study, content analysis is a useful tool for addressing practical assessment needs. This process is especially strong in that it provides an opportunity for a large number of faculty “voices” to be represented in the process (i.e., through their syllabi). This strength can thus contribute toward promoting faculty buy in and involvement in the assessment process, specifically in programs in which assessment is viewed as an intrusion or a task to be feared rather than a tool for program improvement.

The paucity of literature related to assessment methods in arts and humanities general education is a clear call for more published studies of this type. Rigorous research that can be used to inform assessment practice can be time consuming, but the returns from such efforts can substantially increase the quality of assessment. A key purpose for assessment is providing programs with meaningful information about student learning for program improvement. As such, assessment can play a vital role in the effort to establish support for the argument that the arts and humanities contribute in meaningful ways to cognitive and affective areas of student development. We have presented one method for engaging in the first critical step of the assessment process: writing objectives. Engaging in assessment need not be an albatross to the arts and humanities. Rather, assessment has the potential to be a great asset in supporting the place of arts and humanities in the general education framework.

## Appendix: Arts and Humanities Course Offerings by Tier

### Tier 1: Historical, Cultural, and Philosophical Perspectives

- Introduction to American Studies
- World History to 1550

- World History Since 1550
- God, Meaning, and Morality
- Foundations of Western Culture
- Modern Perspectives
- Cross-Cultural Perspectives
- Introduction to Philosophy
- World Religions

## Tier 2: Fine Arts

- Art in General Culture
- Survey of World Art I: Prehistoric to Renaissance
- Survey of World Art II: Renaissance to Modern
- Music in General Culture
- Music in America
- Introduction to Global Music
- Introduction to Theatre

## Tier 3: Literature

- Survey of English Literature: Restoration Through the Romantic Era
- Survey of English Literature: From the Victorian Era Through the 20th Century
- Survey of English Literature: From the Civil War to the Modern Period
- Studies in World Literature
- Survey of American Literature: From the Beginning of the Civil War
- Survey of American Literature: From the Civil War to the Modern Period
- Survey of African-American Literature
- Great Works of Literature

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