

**University of Dayton Arts and Human Experience Cluster**  
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Assessment Report 2003-2004

I. Introduction

A recurring theme in my assessments of the Arts and Human Experience (AHE) cluster over the years has been the expressed hope that faculty teaching cluster courses would become major stakeholders in the cluster enterprise, skillfully building on the foundation of the humanities base and actively overseeing the mission and the integrative goals of the AHE cluster. Each new year yields faculty success stories that buoy me up and keep my hope afloat that we are indeed making progress toward a common vision for clusters. As Coordinator of the AHE cluster, I am justifiably proud of its team-taught courses, its bidominal courses, and its recently approved innovative courses in such areas as Islamic Philosophy, Visual Resources, German Film, and Science and Literature. But at the same time I have to acknowledge that there are some less than stellar moments in our delivery of the AHE cluster (which I will address later) that continue to dog me and to thwart the realization of the common vision that we should be striving for. That said, I have to admit that this year's assessment process has been in the main a rewarding experience for me. Both the input from the focus groups and my review of the assignments and writing samples from the faculty assisting with cluster assessment have yielded many positive results.

II. Analysis of Student Interviews

A. Summary of number of students interviewed and process employed.

To gather data from students who had completed the AHE cluster, I identified a representative sample of students (20) from the cluster population, and invited them to participate in one of two focus group discussions on the cluster. As it turned out, I ended up with two separate sessions, one with six students and one with five. I later discovered that two of the students in my capstone course for the film minor were completing the AHE cluster, so I also asked them to independently answer the five major questions that I posed during the focus groups. Their responses brought the total number of students consulted to 13.

B. Outcome 1

Measure 3:

Students almost universally were aware that their humanities base courses were designed to help them answer the question, "What does it mean to be human?" When I asked them how their cluster courses helped them "develop a deepened understanding of what it means to be a responsible human being," however, they stammered a bit initially until one or two recalled the themes of the humanities base (without prompting from me!) and saw that their cluster courses were addressing those themes in concrete contexts (e.g., social and cultural history, novels, films, performance arts, etc.). Eventually most agreed that their cluster courses challenged them to see

how their experiences are linked to human experience in general [I, of course, reminded them of my own motto—"Literature is life!"—but quickly added, history is life, music is life, etc.]

Measure 4: Several students were quick to point out that upper-level courses in humanities base subjects were natural links for them in seeing connections between the humanities base and clusters,

but others also made cases for seeing their arts studies (other than ENG) and social science studies courses as "connected" as well. None of the students consulted had taken PHY108, so science studies was not mentioned. One student who had taken the bidominal ENG 363/HST 308 felt doubly blessed in that the connections he made were interdisciplinary even though he was taking the course for ENG credit alone.

#### C. Outcome 2:

Measure 4: Students who had taken team-taught, bidominal, and multi-disciplinary genre (e.g., film) courses had a keen understanding of the significance (and, I might add, the importance) of connected learning. The concept of "domains of knowledge" may have been a mystery to them when they started their cluster studies and choosing three cluster courses from different domains may have seemed like a hit or miss proposition, but having completed their clusters most agreed that they could now see the significance. Three or four this year (as opposed to one last year) suggested that teachers in cluster courses should talk more about connected learning in class.

#### D. Outcome 3:

Measure 4: Again students who had taken team-taught, bidominal, and multi-disciplinary genre courses agreed that they had a good grasp of issues that cross disciplinary boundaries. Others gave examples of how their assignments challenged them to look at issues from multiple perspectives rather than limiting their focus to a single one. [I challenged them to consider the maxim, "All art is subversive," and determine how that statement would be approached by practitioners in the domains of knowledge. Silence was the first response, but eventually some students began to question the definition of "subversive" and we had a lively discussion of how Picasso, Beethoven, and even Ridley Scott "shook up" the art world and audiences with their creative vision.]

#### E. Analysis relative to specific cluster goals

As usual students see the goals related to the courses in the specific domains of knowledge they have taken to complete their cluster as relevant to their experience, but the others puzzle them (e.g., since none of them had taken PHY 108, they failed to see the relevance of the goal, "understanding the scientific and technological principles that underlie the arts and give them their unique qualities and characteristics.") [I asked them in this case how the science of physics relates to the arts and mentioned that the title of PHY 108 is The Physics of Light and Color. No light bulbs went off. I retreated and read them the overview statement from the AHE cluster description: "Each course within the Arts and Human Experience Cluster will look in depth at a particular set of information and ideas and at the same time contribute to a broad comprehension

of the arts as a collective, integrated record of creative human activity.” And then I shut up!]. The overall assessment of outcomes, however, met or exceeded expected results.

## F. Conclusion

Individual students complained that particular courses they took did not mention the humanities base or cluster goals, and assignments in those course were not based on cluster themes or connected learning. I am happy to say that these complaints were sparse and usually only involved one course out of a student’s three-course experience.

## III. Analysis of Students’ Written Work

### A. Summary of numbers of pieces of work reviewed, how gathered, etc.

Portfolios of students in the focus groups and papers and assignments submitted by four faculty members who volunteered to assist with assessment (two each term) were reviewed as part of this analysis.

### B. Outcome 1:

Measure 2: This year the student papers included samples of literary analysis, response papers, reviews of performances, and reviews and analyses of films. Clearly all of these papers show that students are continuing to build on the reading and writing skills developed in the humanities base, but again this year the information literacy component and the writing from sources component are only marginally being developed in students’ cluster courses.

C. Outcome 2: The assignments given in all four courses challenged students to make connections across disciplines, and their written work shows that they were able to address the questions asked and respond to the challenge in meaningful ways.

### D. Outcome 3:

Measure 3: Student papers show that they are developing an ability to cross disciplinary boundaries in their writing. In some cases the faculty are creating these opportunities for the students, but in other cases their personal initiatives are the source of their insights. The photography assignment in PHY 108 and the sonnets written in ENG 205 are good examples of opening the minds of the students up to experience different perspectives on art in a cross disciplinary context. Similar samples in the portfolios also revealed this tendency.

### E. Analysis relative to specific cluster goals

As I indicated earlier, I was two students short of the 15 representative student portfolios, but the elaborate samples from Dr. Kimbrough’s ENG 205 course gave me enough corroborative evidence to make the sample work. Students continue to encounter and reflect upon artists’ works, to write reflective essays on artistic performances and/or exhibits, and to broaden their

understanding of the arts and human experience at or above expected results, but this year there was some slippage in Outcome 2 in writing about religious sources of information. This may well be a result of the diversity in this year's sample, but I think this outcome once again needs to be discussed as a viable expectation for AHE.

#### F. Conclusion

Student writing is on task and on target, but I'm seeing fewer and fewer research assignments. Grading standards and a lack of evaluative comments in the papers submitted by the faculty in support of assessment were at times problematic. Basic competency levels expected from students who have completed the humanities base are not always in evidence in students' work, and in some cases papers with a clear lack of critical thinking skills and mechanical errors received the same grades as those that are in the main thoughtful and correct. [That's the English teacher in me speaking!]. I'm not sure that we can do anything to correct this problem.

#### IV. Comments on Syllabi

My comments on syllabi can be reduced to one question: Where are they? Despite all the efforts of the Associate Dean for Connected Learning and the Cluster Coordinator, a majority of faculty still see no need to post their syllabi on Quickplace. I'm not sure what more we can do. Perhaps Chairs could ask faculty to submit syllabi to them (as a former Chair I know most would not like that idea), perhaps we could threaten to remove courses without posted syllabi from clusters, or perhaps we could simply drop the requirement to post syllabi. I favor a more aggressive plan over capitulation, but what it is I'm not sure. I've tried every way I know how to get a THR 105 syllabus posted, and nothing has worked so far. Any new ideas are welcome. On the positive side, those who submit syllabi are mentioning the cluster connection, some cluster goals, and some cluster-relevant assignments. I hope we will continue to discuss this problem next year and ideally come up with some workable solutions.

#### V. Comments on programs, workshops, and other faculty activities

This year culminated with a cluster meeting that allowed all cluster faculty to experience both a general program and a session dedicated to specific cluster topics. This was truly a productive day. Not only did all faculty present learn from their colleagues who had worked within the various clusters in a connected way, but they had a chance to explore in depth a particular topic of theme that related to their particular cluster. I do think next year if we use this model again (and I think we should), we need to allot an hour for each cluster to discuss "business" related items that apply to the delivery of that cluster. For example, my workshop has always focused in on assessment and has reminded faculty of expected cluster outcomes. Not inspiring dialogue, but informative. This can be done in a midterm workshop separate from a general meeting of clusters, but I think it should be an integrated part of that day. The Cluster Fair in the fall works nicely with ASI 150, but I think we have to do something different in the spring.

The other issue related to AHE is the possible loss of the First Tuesday program. This year again the Montgomery Country Grants agent CultureWorks has not funded that program, which is an important ingredient in our arts education in the cluster. We will seek funds from another

source, but we may end up asking clusters for some program support. Arts Street should open up new avenues for faculty and students this year, and I hope clusters will be consulted on programming and activities there. In September I hope to find some money to arrange a satellite performance

from Neil O'Shea, an Irish actor who will have a week-long residency at Wright State University.

Neil performed on campus five years ago, and he did a fine job. I'm sure we can get him to do James Joyce and involve the humanities base students as well.

Last year I remarked that "Team spirit remains high among cluster coordinators." I want to repeat that and say besides that the information flow, the Quickplace site, and a sense of cooperation all add up to more clarity on cluster goals and objectives for all of us.

## VI. Summary

I have set four objectives for myself to improve the AHE cluster and clusters in general.

A. Set up a focus group lunch each semester for AHE faculty to assess what they are thinking about the cluster. Maybe this may help educate faculty about clusters.

B. Work on getting those syllabi. As I said, I don't have the plan fully worked out, but I'm brainstorming.

C. Set up some program links between clusters during the year, especially with clusters that share courses with AHE. The general cluster session this spring reminded me that a common topic or theme can yield a good discussion. My mentor and dissertation advisor, Helen Vendler, gave the NEH-sponsored Jefferson lecture this May, and her topic focused on the arts and their centrality in humanities education. Cluster faculty in Cross-cultural and AHE might read and discuss her observations in a combined midterm workshop. [Actually all clusters might benefit from this talk, which is available online at the NEH site.]

D. Sort out the pledges Chairs made to offer cluster courses and maybe even develop a three-year plan. Some courses could easily be offered in multiple sections given the numbers, but in some cases aren't offered at all in a given semester. Some courses in clusters have additional restrictions or designations attached to them without any awareness by the coordinator. MUS 327, for example, was an "H" course last year and will be a "C" course this year. This should not happen with cluster courses since enrollment by cluster students is limited at best. If a faculty member wants such designations on a regular basis, I think there are grounds for removing the course from a cluster.