English 120B: American Literature
SLO Assessment
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Background
English 120B: American Literature (1865-Present) is a literature elective course following English 120A (Origins to 1865). It is a survey course designed to give students a broad perspective on the literature of the United States, and an important facet of that goal is to set the literature in its appropriate cultural context. We study the historical/cultural background in which the works are set, and talk a great deal about how they reflect “American cultural values and beliefs” (see SLO #2 below).

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES
The student will:
  1. Identify and describe major currents in the development of American literature from 1865 to the present.
  2. Relate works of American literature to American cultural values and beliefs.
  3. Analyze and evaluate the basic structures and elements of American fiction, poetry, and drama.
  4. Demonstrate an understanding of the various gender and racial perspectives of American literature.
  5. Identify and apply various critical approaches to the study of American literature.
  6. Compare and contrast works of American literature within and across time periods.

Assessment Strategy

Since it’s so important for students in this class to be able to see works of literature in their broader cultural context, I decided to assess SLO #2 by analyzing two of the students’ in-class essay exams (midterm and final). My goal was to assess to what degree they were able to discuss the ways in which American cultural values were reflected in whatever work they chose to focus on for the exams. For both exams the question I asked myself was the same, as I was looking to assess how much their sensitivity to culture’s influence on the literature had improved. I was hoping that, as I continued to draw connections between the works we read and American 20th century culture, that students’ awareness of this would be reflected in their final exam essays. I was looking at the quality of their analyses, of course, but to quantify the results I used a rubric modified from Alison Kuehner’s assessment of English 130 in Spring 2012:

Midterm Essay Analysis
To what degree does the student’s midterm essay relate works of American literature to American cultural values and beliefs?

5- Consistently addresses throughout essay (ie: thesis, body paragraphs, conclusion)
4- Addresses in many parts of the essay (ie: multiple paragraphs)
Findings

Twenty four students took the midterm, and I was not very pleased with the results. My hope was that more students would address cultural values in at least one major section of their essay (3 or higher), when in fact less than half of the class (38%) did so. There were encouraging signs of awareness, such as those excerpted below, but most of these fell under the “addresses in passing” category:

*At the time when “Dulce et Decorum Est” was written, of course, the war would still be raging, so anti-war sentiment would have seemed not only out of place, but also uncalled for. Come the following decade, that would change with the rise of the Lost Generation, including Hemingway. Owen was a man ahead of his time...*

This passage makes oblique reference to the cultural values of the early 20th century, but the student doesn’t elaborate, and quickly drops the subject, never to return. It’s also more a reflection of SLO #1 (identifying “major currents” in American literature). Of course the “currents” follow shifting cultural values, so the distinctions between them are often subtle. This passage falls into the same “promising but undeveloped” class:

*Frost was a true Modernist writer and insisted that poetry could be a way of criticizing social norms. “Desert Places” embraces the emptiness and beauty of nature while describing the modern world as the real “desert place”.*

Here, too, the student flirts with exploring “modern” American culture in connection to Frost’s poem, but moves on before developing her thoughts further.

Final Exam Analysis
To what degree does the student’s final exam essay relate works of American literature to American cultural values and beliefs?
5- Consistently addresses throughout essay (ie: thesis, body paragraphs, conclusion)
4- Addresses in many parts of the essay (ie: multiple paragraphs)
3- Addresses in at least one major section of the essay (ie: one body paragraph)
2- Addresses in passing (ie: mentions in intro. or conclusion)
Findings

By the final exam, three students had dropped the course, but I was pleased to see that a greater percentage (62%) had scored a three or higher on the rubric. I suspect this reflects my own comments to the class after the midterm, since I spoke with them about the importance of showing how the works they wrote about connect to the America from which they emerged. I also added a reminder on the final exam prompt designed to help them focus on issues of history/culture/beliefs, and I’m fairly sure that affected their essays. These excerpts, both from “5” scores, illustrate how students made American culture central to their essays:

Hemingway’s fame may have come because he embodied a key American trait: a clear-eyed determination to see the world as it really is. In this way Hemingway’s “Big, Two-Hearted River” reflects both Naturalism and Realism, especially in its use of metaphor; the “fine scarred hills” of the story mimic the sensation veterans experienced after returning to the war. At the same time, Hemingway’s story refuses to descend into pessimism like his European counterparts’ works; his character Nick is wounded, but like many American heroes, he remains forward looking and optimistic about his future.

Ellison’s “The Invisible Man” offers a dark glance into America’s material culture while also dramatizing how greed intersects with the race relations that have troubled our country since its origins.

Revisions to the Course

Based on the results of the midterm survey, I plan to stress the importance of SLO #2 much earlier in the semester, allowing them to see in the first works we study the connection between the literature and American culture. This will require more stress on the post-Civil War era, painting a clearer picture of America’s cultural identity near the end of the 19th century and how that is reflected in the works of the period.

I’m also planning to add some materials to the course that might highlight ways in which American culture differs from other world cultures. What are “American cultural values and beliefs”? Since many of our students have not spent much time abroad, their proximity to our culture works as a handicap. They need more of a primer in culture as a subjective, shifting phenomenon. “Culture” is a slippery notion, but I think that showing some contrasting values between our country and others may help clarify things.
Finally, I found that students were often able to discuss culture’s relationship to literature in class, yet they struggled with doing so in their essays. This reminds me that I should stress the need to write about cultural values as they’re reflected in the poems, stories and novels. This sustained, written reflection should anchor the concepts more concretely in their minds and help with their writing. A slight modification to SLO #2 would serve as a reminder to myself and students that the ability to “demonstrate” (read: write about) means more than “identify” or “discuss”:

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES
The student will:
1. Identify and describe major currents in the development of American literature from 1865 to the present.
2. Demonstrate the ability to relate works of American literature to American cultural values and beliefs.
3. Analyze and evaluate the basic structures and elements of American fiction, poetry, and drama.
4. Demonstrate an understanding of the various gender and racial perspectives of American literature.
5. Identify and apply various critical approaches to the study of American literature.
6. Compare and contrast works of American literature within and across time periods.