

# ASSESSING CONTENT AREA 1

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**Date: May 5, 2013**

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## **Preamble: Revised CA1 definition and goals**

Arts and Humanities courses should provide a broad vision of artistic and humanistic themes. Guided by trained and experienced artists, designers, musicians, playwrights, actors, writers and scholars, courses in Content Area 1 enable students to explore their place within the larger world so that they, as informed citizens, may participate more fully in the rich diversity of human values and practices. Education in the arts and humanities challenges students by introducing them to ideas rooted in evaluation, analysis, creative thought, interpretation, and knowledge framed by process, context and experience.

The broadly-based Content Area 1 category of Arts and Humanities includes study in many different aspects of human endeavor. In areas traditionally included within the Arts, students explore modes of aesthetic, historical and social expression and inquiry in the visual arts, multimedia arts, the dramatic arts, music and/or analytical and creative forms of writing. Students come to appreciate diverse expressive forms, such as cultural or symbolic representations, belief systems, and/or communicative practices, and how they may change over time. In areas traditionally included within the Humanities, students engage in modes of inquiry relating to history, philosophy, communication, theology or culture.

### **Criteria**

Courses appropriate to this category introduce students to and engage them in at least one of the following:

Investigations and historical/critical analyses of human experience;

Inquiries into philosophical and/or political theory;

Investigations into cultural or symbolic representation as an explicit subject of study;

Comprehension and appreciation of written, visual, multi-modal and/or performing art forms;

Creation or reenactment of artistic works culminating in individual or group publication, production or performance.

Three-credit courses in this category must be supplemented by written/oral and/or performative analysis/criticism.

## A. Introduction

Assessment for Content Area 1 consisted of examining the 170 CA1 (see **Appendix 1**) courses taught and selecting a representative sample of 13 which included courses from most departments, small and large classes, classes combined with CA4 and/or W, as well as lower, middle and upper level courses.<sup>1</sup> The courses selected (see table below) are mostly survey courses with both broad and more focused emphases.

### List of instructors' courses examined

ANTH	1001W	Anthropology Through Film
ARTH	1141	Introduction to Latin American Art/
DRAM	1101	Introduction to the Theatre
ECON	2101W	Economic History of Europe
ENGL	2401	Poetry
FREN	1177	Magicians, Witches, Wizards: Parallel Beliefs & Popular Culture in France
GERM	3255W	Studies in 20th Century German Literature
HIST	1300	Western Traditions Before 1500
ILCS	1149	Cinema and Society in Contemporary Italy
LING	1010	Language and Mind
MUSI	1003	Popular Music and Diversity in American Society
PHIL	1101	Problems of Philosophy
WS	1104	Feminisms and the Arts

We conducted semi-formal interviews which were taped with the assistance of graduate student Zareen Thomas and later transcribed by GEOC staff, with 13 instructors from the Storrs campus (see Appendix 2 for the list of questions) to understand how their courses dialogued with their CA1 criteria, whether they modified them over time and why, and their best practices. Except for one exception (ENGL 2401 taught by an adjunct professor who received his Ph.D. from Uconn) all the courses are taught by regular

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<sup>1</sup> Originally we had selected 14 to get a better representative sample, but we never heard back from one of the instructors we contacted.

faculty members (tenure-track, or tenured). As highlighted in the summarizing tables (Appendices 3 and 4) the 13 courses usually engage with more than one of the CA1 criteria. Zareen provided extremely helpful summaries of each interview that may be used for constructing surveys in the later phase of the assessment (see our concluding remarks).

## **B. Recurring Themes — Content**

Professors interviewed all approached their general education Content Area 1 classes as a process of continuous improvement. We want to note here how enthusiastic all instructors are about teaching their CA1 courses, most saying that these classes were their most challenging and favorite courses to teach. It became apparent that general education courses often require more time and investment from instructors than when teaching non general education courses.

Instructors teach their CA1 classes so students can learn how to think, challenge their own assumptions, and understand how ideas and art forms are symbolic representations that simultaneously shape society and are themselves socially constructed. The 13 courses surveyed met CA1 criteria<sup>2</sup>, and all instructors work hard to constantly update their courses to engage their students. Despite a wide range of disciplines and subject matter taught, there seem to be several unifying theoretical endeavors followed by instructors in their classes. All CA1 instructors interviewed attempt to teach their students the following:

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<sup>2</sup> A few instructors at first did not know what the criteria were specifically, but during the interviews it always became clear that they were all fulfilling CA1 criteria, and usually more than one.

- Salience — What to remember and how;
- How “to read” and explore symbolic systems;
- How to wrestle with questions and issues that great artists and scholars have wrestled with as well in the past;
- How to acquire historical understanding of different issues;
- How to acquire critical perspectives of human experiences;
- How to sharpen critical awareness;
- How to see the world through different disciplinary prisms to attain a performative understanding of what they observe, do, listen to, write about.

Instructors assess and provide learning opportunities for their students by giving them — either solely or in combination — different types of writing assignments, multiple choice exams, short answer exams, quizzes, the possibility of create different kinds of portfolio, listening to recordings, attending performances, and participating in small group discussions over the course of the semester (in class or during discussion sections when appropriate). A consistent major hurdle confronting instructors was the fact that students did not do the assigned reading, or watch the assigned performances.

Most instructors noted that they are not always sure about what works and what does not work. Therefore, they regularly implement pedagogical changes to better deliver their course content. As the student population changes so do the ways instructors teach. While instructors argue that they do not change the theoretical paradigms of the subject matter they teach, most of them try to relate the content to the student’s daily life. Some of the most common initiatives have been to integrate a wide range of media and technologies in their classes including PowerPoint lectures, use of clickers, illustrations

of theoretical concepts in different multi-modal forms (Youtube clips, films, performances, concerts, music, art exhibitions, virtual tours, weblinks, readings of play or poem....), Survey Monkey, student manuals, online courses, online discussions, HuskyCt, and Mediasite. To a large extent, these methodologies are used to provide students with the tools to better comprehend and appreciate written, visual and performing art forms as well as acquire a scholarly vocabulary to discuss them. Some instructors, however, have grown a bit weary of how technologies distract students and impact on the ways they learn and retain.

Several instructors cited the difficulties in teaching large classes, especially without Teaching Assistants leading discussion-sections, this is particularly true for the arts courses. All instructors of large classes agreed that the class size and discussion sections play a key role in the type of assignments instructors devise to assess students' knowledge, as well as in preventing students from cheating and plagiarizing. More positively all instructors commented on the key role discussion sections play to enhance learning.

Some instructors engage in interdisciplinary methodologies to get better results, especially when the class has a CA4 denomination. Depending on various disciplines, interdisciplinary theories are systematically taught, whether the course is also a CA4 or not.

While most instructors required some form of writing in their classes, 3 courses had a W component making CA1, according to the instructors, that much more challenging to teach. For these courses, the curricular challenge is to balance teaching

students about writing, while at the same time advancing the CA1 and course content objectives through the writing component.

### **C. Pedagogical concerns**

Within the general education curriculum at the University of Connecticut, the very combination of the arts and the humanities under a single Content Area 1 has several significant ramifications for identifying pedagogical issues and assessing teaching effectiveness. The breadth of topics and approaches in even the small representative sample of courses we investigated makes finding meaningful patterns of instruction, teaching objectives, learning goals and their assessment extremely challenging. In attempting to divide and conquer this vast and unruly disciplinary terrain, we will take into account some naturally occurring distinctions to help present and organize the qualitative data from our interviews. These distinctions include:

- Configuration of the class (large lecture with TA-led discussion sections, large lecture with no TA, online, or small lecture);
- Content area belonging primarily to the Arts, the Humanities, or a synthesis of the two;
- Course focus on academic/scholarly content or performance/studio-based/literary creative activity;
- Which one (or several) of the 5 CA1 criteria the course fulfills.

To a certain extent, the designation of CA1 as “Arts and Humanities” connotes a false dichotomy between the two disciplinary categories. While some courses engage more directly and exclusively with humanistic fields — linguistics (LING 1010), history (HIST 1300), philosophy (PHIL 1101), and economics (ECON 2101W) — many courses at least to some extent represent a synthesis of the arts and humanities. That is, whether engaging as their subject theater (DRAM 1101), American popular music (MUSI 1003),

French and German literature (FREN 1177 and GERM 3255W, respectively), English poetry (ENGL 2401), Latin American art (ARTH 1141), film (ANTH 1001W and ILCS 1149), or a broad range of art (WS 1104), these courses all represent a critical exploration of art forms within a particular humanistic discipline-specific context as an essential aspect of general education in the University curriculum.

One common theme expressed in different ways by all instructors is the special role played by interpretation and reflection. While these processes of course relate to the study of all disciplines, the nature of the arts and humanities magnifies their importance. Further, teachers and students alike must necessarily consider the critical relationship between the observer and the thing observed — whether it be the historical practice of witchcraft in medieval France, literature on the Holocaust, or New Orleans funeral procession music — to take three typically disparate examples from our sampled courses. Interpretation and reflection have personal and sometimes emotional ramifications as well, in that instructors encourage students to relate the content of these courses to their daily lives.

The 13 courses sampled divide up into 3 basic configurations. Seven are large lecture classes with TA-led discussion groups. (These are FREN 1177, WSGS 1104, PHIL 1101, ANTH 1001W, HIST 1300, LING 1010, and MUSI 1003.) Three are small lectures (40 students or less) taught by fulltime faculty (ENGL 2401, GERM 3255W, and ARTH 1041); and two are taught online (ECON 2101W and ILCS 1149).

For the large lecture courses with discussion sections, ongoing related pedagogical concerns are the training and mentoring of graduate teaching assistants, and

the optimal role of discussion sections in effectively delivering course content. In our interviews, all but one professor spoke at length on the crucial pedagogical role played by the discussion sections and the TAs leading them. One common theme was that the relative intimacy of a small discussion section created a “safe zone” for discussion of controversial and sensitive issues, arising from works of music and art, humanistic themes, philosophical themes, or a combination of these. This is related to the theme of relating course material to students’ lives mentioned above: small discussion sections foster the kind of intense reflection required to make these sorts of connections. Another function of discussion sections was that of teaching students to read critically and write articulately on a given question. In this vein, several professors noted one of the ways they changed the course over time was the more rigorous structuring of the discussion sections, from a relatively freewheeling session to a more scripted task-driven one. One professor actually created a manual for the graduate TAs to help them with teaching strategies, including an array of options for activities, discussion questions, and icebreakers.

Despite the crucial pedagogical role of discussion sections for large lecture courses, not all departments can afford them. Those professors who don’t have them commented on their often inventive efforts to compensate for this lack, possibly through limited small group breakout sessions in the course of the lecture or through online resources; they also agreed that discussion sections would enable better instruction. We strongly support efforts to continue funding TAs for large lecture courses, and in particular to do so for courses lacking them at present.

## **D. Pedagogical Objectives – Assessing Achievement**

Notwithstanding the enormous variety of disciplines in our CA1 course sample, the 13 courses may be roughly divided into two broad categories: 9 courses whose primary subject matter is artwork of some kind (music, studio art, poetry, drama, film); and 4 courses whose subject matter resides in the humanities (philosophy, economic and political theory, linguistics, history). The basic idea of teaching students what it means to engage in critical analysis enabled by a discipline-specific methodology or set of methodologies is shared by all courses in CA1. In some sense all strive to change students' lives through increased awareness of the human condition. How they attempt to do this as reflected in their pedagogical objectives will be outlined below.<sup>3</sup>

### a. Critical Analysis of Art

Several common pedagogical objectives emerged from the 9 courses focusing on artworks, the main ones being:

- The dual and related (reflexive) processes of art shaping society, and of the meaning(s) of an artwork as reflecting and intersecting with its socio-cultural context(s);
- Getting students to think critically about the artwork as explored through the disciplinary methodology;
- Balancing and relating “technical analysis” of the artwork (with the attendant appropriate vocabulary) and its cultural embedding and contextualization;
- Balancing the “facts” of history and geography associated with the artwork vis-à-vis its inherent lack of definitive interpretation.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that formulating pedagogical objectives for these courses by their instructors will be influenced by whether an individual course fulfills “only” CA1, or whether they also fulfill CA4 (MUSI 1003, WS 1104) or CA4 Int’l (FREN 1177, ARTH 1141, ANTH 1001W, ILCS 1149).

All courses, whether lower, middle or upper level, emphasized the importance of “close reading” of the artwork, combining culture-contextual and structural perspectives. For some courses — music for example — this is especially challenging because of the ubiquity of music in modern life, and because music’s emotional impact on people tends to discourage students’ desire to interrogate it as an art form. It appears that balancing close reading and analysis of works of art with their proper cultural/intellectual context always represents a pedagogical challenge. This is perhaps made more acute by those courses that also fulfill CA4 or CA4 International. For example, one instructor elects to give a geography test and spend class time teaching geography because a) students’ knowledge cannot be assumed; and b) achieving teaching goals necessitates this knowledge as prerequisite. In another instance, the need to fulfill learning objectives in diversity limit to some degree the number of works studied and the depth with which they are examined. Even in fulfilling diversity objectives, another professor limited the range of subject matter upon repeating the course to focus almost exclusively on movements in America and cut out some international content; it proved necessary to limit the extent of diversity to practical limits for students to take in for a 1000-level course.

It is worth noting that virtually all professors of critical arts courses cited as an underlying and necessary pedagogical goal the teaching of students about *history* — that is, knowing at least the landmark events, important people and the associated dates of both. Whether a history of social movements (feminism, suffrage, student protest), monumental wartime events (the Holocaust, the war in Vietnam, the Spanish-American War), or the history of an art form (the genres of African-American music leading to

American/Western European jazz), it is the historical record that provides the ground for close reading and the production of socio-cultural meaning.

Another complementary but nonetheless different pedagogical goal cited by several instructors might be described as teaching a sociological or anthropological perspective. This was articulated in a number of ways: for example, for students to not take prejudices or stereotypes for granted; to be aware of cultural differences and indeed to question the reliability of observation itself; to interrogate contemporary impressions of a national culture in light of their actions and allegiances during WWII. Developing such a critical perspective, while challenging especially in light of general student deficiencies in critical reading/thinking and historical awareness, clearly is important to the pedagogical goals for these courses.

Regarding assessment of student learning and achievement of instructor's intended learning outcomes, all critical arts courses have in common periodic quizzes, a midterm and final exam. For courses having support for sufficient numbers of graduate TAs to lead discussion groups, or for courses with relatively low enrollment, the means of assessment have the possibility for more creativity and personal reflection, an important component and obviously a desirable option where possible. One such assessment is a writing portfolio, including a variety of writings (e.g., journal, and reviews of events attended on campus). Others are creative artworks modeled after those studied in class: composing a song, writing a poem. Even in classes without TA support, teachers find successful ways to use creative art making as a means of assessment (e.g., collaborating on writing/producing a play and pitching it to a potential backer).

b. Humanistic Disciplines and a Critical Approach to Studying Human Experience

For lack of a better term, we shall draw together the four courses whose primary focus is an area traditionally associated with the humanities (as opposed to the arts) under the unwieldy above title; these courses are LING 1010 (Linguistics), HIST 1300 (History), PHIL 1101 (Philosophy), and ECON 2101W (Economics). The first three are large lecture classes with graduate TA-led discussion sections; the fourth is an online course.

Not surprisingly, several of the main pedagogical goals associated with the nine critical arts courses examined above are shared by the four humanities-focused courses. The most important of these are the development of skill in close critical reading of texts, and understanding history and historical process. Significantly, for LING 1010, HIST 1300 and PHIL 1101, another crucial goal emerges that we'll call the *relevance / universality* theme. Regardless of the specific content of the course or even its home discipline, the professors for these courses all articulated as a primary pedagogical goal getting students to engage critically with the philosophical questions, language and communication issues and literary/historical themes as a means to an end — to come away with these modes of inquiry and answer these questions in relation to students' own lives. This relates to the importance of personal reflection cited in relation to the arts-based courses. Here, however, as a point of departure the professors seek to impress on students that the basic content of their courses is about what it means to be human. Of course the specific methodologies and means by which the three courses set out to achieve these goals are different.

Given the status of the above three courses as large lecture with TA-led discussion groups, the means of assessment are relatively consistent. In general, assessment comprises midterm and final exams, with the discussion sections utilized for writing assignments and quizzes.

c. Use of Technology (in both arts- and humanities-based courses)

Instructors for the majority of courses that we sampled explicitly linked their use of classroom technology to the pedagogical goals for the class. Not surprisingly, HuskyCT was the most widely used technology vehicle, allowing controlled access to all manner of audio and visual arts and sources and streaming possibilities as well as being used for online quizzes and other means of assessment. Only two large lecture classes — DRAM 1101 and to a lesser extent LING 110 — made use of Clicker technology in encouraging student response in large lecture classes. A few instructors cited students' expectation that HuskyCT would be an integral part of the course as a constraint on their organization of the course. Thus, one professor elected to migrate from the "comfort zone" of his own website to HuskyCT for reasons of alignment with student expectation and University practice, notwithstanding the loss of some control over the presentation of material. Most professors using HuskyCT also utilize PowerPoint in summarizing course content and, in one instance, keeping the professor on the straight and narrow to avoid digressing too often. Survey Monkey was another tool used by one professor in helping to determine students' prior knowledge of the subject area.

There is one other technological dimension worth noting that came up in our interviews, which entails the drawbacks of technology. While this issue was explicitly

cited by only one instructor, it underlies the crucial pedagogical goal of most instructors of critical reading of texts and critical thinking about issues. Put simply, the issue is whether technology has become an end in itself rather than a means to implement pedagogical objectives; and, as a result, students are actually discouraged from critical engagement with texts and ideas. Viewed from this perspective, the uploading of PowerPoint slides to HuskyCT represents an overly neat and oversimplified schematic of the complex ideas essayed in the course. Students then would be better served by having to take notes in class and thereby connect the dots themselves.

### **E. Concluding remarks**

This assessment provided us with a window into how the learning objectives and criteria of CA1 are appropriate to CA1 courses from a wide range of disciplines in the humanities and the arts. In light of our analysis above, we want to outline a number of recommendations for the next stage:

*Assessing Instructors of CA1 courses:* We believe that the kind of qualitative assessment we have designed works well for CA1 courses. We understand, however, the difficulty to conduct such a lengthy process with all CA1 instructors. It would be possible to design a online survey using some of our questions. With permission of the instructors and Zareen Thomas, GEOC could put on its website the summaries of the 13 interviews, to guide the kind of details surveyed instructors could provide. The design of surveys for further assessment of CA1 instructors needs to include a strong *qualitative* component. In light of the answers we received, we recommend asking instructors to participate in the design of surveys given to students to assess CA1 courses.

*Assessing Students in CAI courses:* As we have experienced recently with the online courses, professor could submit extra questions to students to assess their specific courses. Such professor-initiated assessment of students' knowledge would shed light on what the students learn (or did not) and whether specific pedagogical objectives would have been realized.

**APPENDIX 1 (See separate document — Microsoft excel file)**

**List of all CA1 courses, their location, and enrollment capacity.**

Note: After the list was compiled, departments were called individually to confirm enrollment numbers

**APPENDIX 2**

**Interview Questions for CA1 instructors.**

Bio about professor:

When did you come to UConn?

Status: Assistant, Associate, Full, Professor in residence, Graduate student

1. How long have you been teaching a Content Area 1 course?
2. We are interviewing you today because you are teaching (course title)
3. Which of the CA1 criteria does the course fulfill?
4. Can you give examples?
5. What work best for you in the class? Can you differentiate what works best for you as a teacher and what works best for the students?
6. If you taught the class more than once, did you change anything? What did you change? Why? On what basis did you make changes? Was that theory-driven? Do you have specific reasons for using special technologies? And why? Or other methodologies you have introduced? What motivated you to change or modify the course?
7. Could you summarize for us what are your main goals for the class?
8. What do you do to assess what the students learn in the class?
9. What would you want your students to remember from the class? About the course reading? About the course activities? About the course exercises?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share with us about Content area 1 courses?
11. Do you love the course?