

Revised Theater Major Assessment Process

Draft: December 18, 2017

Introduction

This document is intended to supersede the previous theater major assessment plan drafted in 2012. The department has changed significantly in the past five years: we've seen a turnover in faculty, a dramatic increase in the number of theater majors, the articulation of learning goals shared by both theater and dance, and the formulation of a more rigorous comprehensive exercise process for theater majors. So, while the 2012 document proved a useful starting place, these changes have necessarily prompted a reevaluation of our assessment process.

That said, we remain convinced that the comprehensive exercise provides the logical and most efficacious opportunity we have to assess the work of our majors and offer critical feedback. Changes to the comps process, detailed below, now allow us to track a student's work over a longer span of time and in more detail, providing us an opportunity to remediate any perceived deficiencies. At the same time, these changes require more measurable evidence that students demonstrate proficiency in each of the department's learning goals, also detailed below.

The cumulative result of these changes has been, naturally, a change in how we assess student work. In other words, assessment changes have followed in the wake of programmatic changes as a necessary matter of practice. Here we seek to articulate and formalize that practice.

Departmental Learning Goals

Although theater and dance will individually assess their majors, the department has articulated six learning goals that both share. They are:

Creativity

Every student who takes a course in our department will have the experience of engaging their creative imagination in the pursuit of making live performance. This may involve solving the problems of bodies in space, of text in performance, or of light, sound, and physical materials manipulated into aesthetic form. Whatever the specific goal, every student will have the opportunity to discover and exercise their own creative potential.

Collaboration

Every student who takes a course in our department will have the experience of collaborative creation. Making art inevitably engenders a personal attachment to one's vision and ideas. At the same time, live performance demands a negotiation of artistic vision between the individual and the group, the great potential of which is to transcend the limitations of the individual. Every student will have the opportunity to negotiate the relationship between themselves and their collaborators by working together to achieve an artistic goal.

Critical Analysis

Every student who takes a course in our department will come to understand the inseparability of creative imagination and critical analysis. Creative imagination unharnessed from critical thought refuses meaning; critical thought devoid of imagination risks sterility. In fact, it would be impossible to exercise one without engaging the other. Every student will have the opportunity to learn and practice modes of critical thought essential to the making of live performance.

Historical Context

Every student who takes a course in our department will come to understand the interconnectedness of art and its historical moment. Live performance by its very nature is a conversation with the cultural values, social practices, and political imperatives of its time. To this it brings its own deep historical legacy of conventions, presumptions, and prejudices. To speak

responsibly and ethically, live performance must critically question not only the world, but also itself, bearing always in mind that it is not addressing an abstract world but a living audience. Every student will exercise responsibility for their creative work through an ongoing critical assessment of its meanings, its methods, and its implications.

Breadth of Knowledge

Students who major in or pursue substantial coursework and performance opportunities in our department will accumulate a broad knowledge of the diverse practices, historical developments, and theoretical perspectives that comprise and inform theater or dance in both local and global contexts.

Breadth of Practice

Students who major in or pursue substantial coursework and performance opportunities in our department will acquire the foundational skills upon which to develop a performance practice in theater or dance. For dance, these include choreography, contemporary dance practices, body techniques and somatic research, and performance technology. For theater, these include acting and performance, directing, design, playwriting and dramaturgy, and performance technology.

Sub-Disciplinary Mastery

Students who major in or pursue substantial coursework and performance opportunities in in our department will develop at least a nascent mastery in one specific sub-discipline of theater or dance. For theater, these include acting and performance, directing, design, playwriting, and dramaturgy. For dance, these include performance and choreography. Proficiency in any of these areas is not limited to technical craft, but includes an advanced ability to think critically about the discipline and their own work. For senior majors, the integrative exercise will provide the opportunity to deepen as well as demonstrate this proficiency.

These goals mark a substantial shift from the learning outcomes of the previous document. While those outcomes focused more narrowly on the skills and aptitudes demanded by the practical realization of a theater production (and specifically the production of a comps project), the new goals are more holistic and encompassing, reflecting the sum of what a student should have learned from their education as a theater major. Many of the questions posed in the previous document remain relevant and useful, and we continue to ask them. At the same time, we recognize their limitations; in matters of creativity especially, every student and every comprehensive project is unique, and demands that we formulate our questions accordingly. (More on this below.)

The Comprehensive Project and Assessment

The student comprehensive exercise remains the most useful opportunity to assess student learning, but the comps process has been significantly altered since the original assessment document was drafted. At that time, a comps project was almost entirely creative and managerial, and although students were required to discuss various aspects of their work with the faculty at different points during the process, there was no written component required.

That changed in 2012–2013 with the advent of a process in which third-term juniors are required to submit a written comps proposal, discuss the proposal at a formal presentation to the faculty and staff, and then revise the proposal if needed. Further, a substantial research paper has become a component of every comps project, and is due prior to the start of rehearsals for the play or performance. Finally, after completion of the project, all students are required to write a reflection paper about the process and product. While each student works with an individual faculty member assigned to them after their project is approved, both tenure-line faculty meet individually with the student for a final de-brief of their work, a conversation usually jump-started by the reflection paper.

At these meetings, too, each faculty member will present the student with a completed “Project Assessment” (see Appendix I). The project assessment asks two questions apropos of each of the learning goals listed above. To take one example: How did the project demonstrate the student’s

creativity? In what ways, if any, could the project have been more creative? The specificity of these questions as they relate to each of the goals prevents our assessment from becoming generalized and the learning goals from becoming elided. At the same time, it necessitates rigor in the assessment and provides us with a written record we can later peruse to glean information across students and time.

The changes to the comps requirements have been instrumental in doing a more thorough assessment of many of the goals listed above, but most particularly their capacity for critical analysis, historical contextualization, and sub-disciplinary mastery. What follows is a look at the nodal points of the comps process that allow assessment organized by learning goal.

Creativity

The comps proposal is the first moment at which we can assess the student's creativity as reflected in the imaginative vision for the project. It isn't enough for a student simply to choose a play to produce, they must envision and articulate how a project will be realized on stage. If a proposed project fails to provide sufficient challenges, creative and otherwise, it will be rejected.

While an overarching vision is clearly a significant mark of creativity, creativity must also be brought to bear in solving the many daily problems that arise in realizing a performance. This level of creativity is assessed informally when faculty and staff, including but not limited to the faculty mentor, observe rehearsals and offer feedback, which they do throughout the process.

The final performance is, of course, the ultimate measure of creativity. As noted above, faculty conduct detailed assessment of the performance. In addition, all comps projects are required to be performed for the public, which itself is an assessment that only trial by fire can provide. Audience reception is also usually addressed in the debriefings.

Collaboration

In most cases, students need to assemble a production team with which to collaborate to realize their project on stage. Working intensively with the student throughout the process, the faculty mentor has a first-hand opportunity to monitor the collaborative interaction among the production team. Immediate feedback is given, allowing the student to attempt to correct any issues that arise. This first-hand observation of the process becomes a seminal part of the final assessment of collaboration, along with the success of the collaboration in creating a compelling project.

Critical Analysis

The first assessment of critical analysis comes at the proposal stage. Here faculty will assess a student's analysis of a play both in terms of its dramaturgical structure (narrative, action, character development) and its literary "meaning" (thematics, motifs, imagery, symbolic content). To some degree, a student will also have to articulate how the play engages its social, cultural, and/or political world, and how the world of the play mediates our own.

The critical / historical paper requires that students go much deeper in their analysis as well as broader in their approach. The faculty mentor assesses their work at this stage, and can ask for revisions if necessary. If that's the case, the revisions would be due before the start of rehearsals, insuring that the student can translate their research and writing into theatrical form.

The reflection paper requires the student to exercise their ability to critique their own work. This ability will be assessed both by the faculty mentor and the other faculty in the department and discussed at the debriefings.

Historical Context

The process for assessing a student's ability to situate historically a work of art as well as their own work is identical to that for critical analysis. An explicit requirement of the critical / historical paper is that they do precisely this.

Breadth of Knowledge

A student's breadth of knowledge is less easily assessed vis-à-vis the comps project. We hope to ensure such breadth through the major requirements.

Sub-Disciplinary Mastery

Theater, as a discipline, is comprised of many sub-disciplines (acting, directing, and design, to name a few). While a theater artist may achieve mastery of more than one of these sub-disciplines, most achieve mastery of only one or two – beyond that the task becomes highly impracticable. We require students to attain a beginning mastery of one sub-discipline, defining “mastery” as the capacity to work professionally or to gain admission into a selective graduate program. If this isn't full mastery per se, it is something more than mere proficiency.

The comps project is both the vehicle through which a student usually achieves mastery and its demonstration. Because the comps process requires students to develop a suitably challenging project, the assessment of mastery is usually an easy task. The debriefings provide an opportunity for faculty to discuss those areas in which a student excelled – i.e., demonstrated mastery – and those that might need remediation.

Senior Major Assessment Survey

The discussion above focuses on the assessment of student work, but, of course, the assessment of student work is necessarily an assessment of our work. The many changes to our program since the first assessment document is reflective of precisely that. Another specific addition to our assessment is a written student assessment survey (see Appendix II). While the comps project debriefing usually involves discussing the student's Carleton career holistically, we also want to provide students an opportunity to critique the program anonymously. At the end of their final term, students are sent the survey which they can return to the departmental administrator. The administrator downloads the surveys and distributes them to the faculty and staff anonymously.

Appendix I

Comprehensive Project Assessment

Creativity

How did the project demonstrate creativity? In what ways, if any, could the project have been more creative?

Collaboration

Was the collaboration among the production team reasonably smooth and productive? Could the comps-er have done anything to strengthen the collaborative process?

Critical Analysis

Did the comps-er demonstrate strong analytical skills both in their critical writing and in the translation of their project from conception to realization? Were there any weaknesses in critical analysis?

Historical Context

Did the comps-er demonstrate the ability to contextualize the project historically both in their written work and in the realization of the project in the present historical moment? Were there any weaknesses in historical contextualization?

Sub-Disciplinary Mastery

Did the comps-er demonstrate beginning mastery of the theatrical sub-discipline that was the subject of their project? Has the comps-er achieved the capacity to work in the theater outside academe or pursue graduate education? In what ways was mastery demonstrated and in what ways might remediation be warranted?

Appendix II

Senior Major Assessment Survey

In an effort to assess the effectiveness of the department's curriculum, production program, and teaching, we are asking you to complete this brief survey about your experience as a major. Your answers to the questions below will be shared within the department and with members of the Carleton administration. If you wish to remain anonymous, you can send your completed form as an attachment to Sally Pierce (spierce2@carleton.edu), who will download them into a file with no individual attribution. Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns. Thanks for your help.

1. What are the most important skills and knowledge you gained from being a major?

2. What single experience in the department was your most positive?

3. What single experience in the department was your most negative?

4. What are the primary strengths of the program?

5. What are the primary weaknesses of the program?