**General Education Thinking Historically Assessment**

Executive Summary

September 2016

During the 2015-16 academic year, the General Education Committee oversaw an assessment of the Thinking Historically component of the Common Inquiries section of the General Education program. Committee member Richard Pointer was charged with facilitating the assessment in conjunction with Dean of Curriculum and Educational Effectiveness, Tatiana Nazarenko. On-campus courses meeting this requirement are offered by the history, political science, art history, economics and business, music, and religious studies departments, and include both lower division and upper division courses. A minority of students (roughly 1/3) fulfills this requirement through off campus programs or AP/IB courses and test scores taken prior to enrolling at Westmont. The assessment conducted only examined Westmont on-campus courses.

Assessment work employed a number of different instruments: a syllabi review of thinking historically courses; a student survey; revision of Certification Criteria language; revision of Interpretive Statement language; creation of a Student Learning Outcome for Thinking Historically; direct assessment of student learning with respect to using primary sources (fall semester 2015); and direct assessment of student learning with respect to using secondary sources and connecting the past with the present (spring semester 2016).

**Indirect Assessment**

During the fall 2015 semester, members of the GE Committee evaluated syllabi from all the courses taught during the spring 2015 and fall 2015 semesters that had been approved previously for Thinking Historically credit. The syllabi were evaluated on the basis of a grid or rubric designed by Dr. Nazarenko, drawn from the college’s syllabus template and the existing Interpretive Statement and Certification Criteria for Thinking Historically. The results were highly encouraging. With almost no exceptions, the syllabi made clear to students why and how their course would meet the Thinking Historically requirement and included appropriate assignments to achieve that end.

Also during the fall semester, a student survey was administered that had students answer a series of close-ended questions as well as one open-ended question. A total of 128 students participated, all of whom had completed a Thinking Historically class. Close-ended questions drew on the language of the Certification Criteria and presented students with a series of statements with which to agree or disagree (five options along a scale). For example, the first question/statement was “The Thinking Historically course that I have completed helped me to develop awareness and appreciation for the particularities of time and place.” On that question, 103 out of the 128 agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, and of the rest 20 were neutral. Similar positive results were recorded for the other six close-ended questions, with percentages in the 75-80% range agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. The open-ended portion of the survey asked students to list the course activities (inside and outside the classroom) which were especially conducive to the development of a “thinking historically” mindset. Students cited dozens of different activities, an implicit endorsement of the varied teaching approaches and assignments faculty teaching in this area employ. Students benefit from the diversity of pedagogical strategies being used in Thinking Historically courses. The most frequent response was engaging with primary sources. All faculty teaching Thinking Historically courses agree that student interaction with primary sources should be an element in such courses.

In October 2015, a large number of faculty teaching Thinking Historically courses as well as several librarians gathered for a lunch discussion about the year’s work. We decided to do an assessment of Certification Criterion #1 (dealing with primary sources) during the fall semester and through subsequent emails decided to do an assessment of Certification Criteria #2 and 3 in the spring. We also began work on revising the language of the Certification Criteria and on devising a Student Learning Outcome. Those tasks would eventually be completed in the spring and summer of 2016 via email and a summer workshop day. The results of these efforts are included in the Recommendations section below.

**Direct Assessment**

Direct assessment of student learning in relation to the TH GELO was conducted in Fall 2015 and Spring 2016. In both cases, an in-house signature assignment tool was used to measure student learning.

**Fall 2015 Methods, Tools, and Results**

Sixty-eight students, which comprises approximately 15% of all students who fulfilled this GE requirement in the 2015-2016 academic year or 27% of all students who met the requirement in the fall of 2015, including students enrolled in off-campus courses, participated in a direct assessment in five thinking historically courses offered by four departments – political science, art history, economics and business, and history. The assessment instrument was designed to evaluate students’ abilities to analyze primary sources[[1]](#footnote-1). The assessment was embedded in existing assignments in these courses, four of which were upper division courses. Faculty evaluated student learning using a rubric adapted from one developed by the history department in 2013 for use with its majors. A common prompt for student writing was developed. Participating faculty were given the freedom to adapt the prompt as necessary to fit the parameters of their existing assignment. While this required some adjustments, it is not believed that these adaptations skewed student results.

The rubric used four levels of student ability (highly developed, developed, emerging, and initial) and evaluated student work with respect to four aspects of analyzing a primary source: author and audience; genre; content; and context. Overall, students showed stronger abilities in analyzing author and audience, content, and context than genre (*Figure 1*).



*Figure 1: Fall 2015 Thinking Historically results (all participating students, n=68)*

The results also showed that each year in school made a difference in performance. That is, seniors outperformed juniors, juniors outperformed sophomores, etc. This suggests that students are learning to think historically both within specifically designated Thinking Historically courses but also as a product of their overall liberal arts education at Westmont; in other words, they are making progress over time. It is also worth noting that in each category, female students performed somewhat better than male students, and that white students and students of color performed at comparable levels. Faculty teaching Thinking Historically courses are satisfied with these results but will encourage themselves and colleagues to spend a bit more time assisting students in understanding how and why the genre of a primary source (e.g. diary, memoir, letter, publicity piece, government document, photograph, map, etc.) must be carefully considered when using it.

**Spring 2016 Methods, Tools, and Results**

Seventy-three students, which comprises approximately 17% of all students who fulfilled this GE requirement in the 2015-2016 academic year or 40% of all students who met the requirement in the spring of 2016, including students enrolled in off-campus courses, participated in a direct assessment instrument designed to evaluate students’ abilities to analyze secondary sources and to make appropriate connections between the past and present. Three Thinking Historically courses selected for this assessment project were offered by the following three departments – religious studies, art history, and history. The assessment was designed around Certification Criteria #2 and #3[[2]](#footnote-2) for Thinking Historically.

The assessment was once again embedded in existing assignments within the three participating courses, two of which were lower division, and used a rubric developed by participating faculty. The rubric used four levels of student ability (highly developed, developed, emerging, and initial) and evaluated student work with respect to two aspects of analyzing a secondary source: understanding an author’s context; and understanding the evolution of historical interpretations or scholarship on the topic. The rubric also evaluated student ability to make effective connections between the past and present. A common prompt was used, though some latitude was once more granted to participating faculty to adapt the language to their particular assignment. The results indicated that more advanced students in the upper division course performed at substantially higher levels on author’s context and connecting past and present, and somewhat higher levels on the evolution of interpretations than lower division students.



*Figure 2: Spring2016 Thinking Historically results (all participating students, n= 73)*

In all three areas, the percentages of students performing at the highly developed and developed levels were considerably lower than the results from the first semester’s assessment: 51% for author’s context, 62% for evolution of interpretations, and 54% for connecting past and present. This was perhaps to be expected since many more students in this assessment were first years and sophomores than in the fall assessment. More encouraging was the fact that juniors and seniors once again demonstrated stronger abilities than sophomores and first years. Female students performed somewhat better than male students, and students of color and white students performed at comparable levels. The main take away from this assessment was that the current language of Certification Criterion #2, upon which the assessment was largely based, is overly ambitious in what it asks General Education students to achieve. Through conversation among many faculty teaching Thinking Historically courses, it became evident that few of us have been seeking to develop in our students the types of abilities specified in Certification Criterion #2. Those abilities are more suited for history majors rather than for General Education students. As a result, the list of recommendations that follow includes revised language for that Certification Criterion. The results of the assessment regarding student skills in connecting past and present also encouraged faculty to clarify the language of Criterion #3 (see list of recommendations below).

**Recommendations**

1. The faculty teaching the Thinking Historically courses will use assessment results for adjusting their pedagogical strategies in individual courses fulfilling this GE requirement. Here are three examples of changes being made this semester: Marianne Robins in her HIS 121 Medieval Mediterranean course is using metaphor as a way of helping her students understand the relevance of genre in interpreting sources, and she is including more discussions of historiographical issues to assist students in understanding secondary source arguments; Lisa DeBoer is integrating a “primary source analysis” assignment into her ART 21 Art History: Pre-historic to Gothic course that will assist students in writing a an end-of-the-semester synthetic essay; Rick Pointer is using a historiographic essay assignment in his HIS 007 United States to 1877 course that has students reading a range of interpretations on the relationship between slavery and racism to enhance students’ abilities in understanding the arguments of secondary sources and recognizing the differences in them. He plans to use a similar assignment in both HIS 007 and HIS 008 whenever he offers those courses to ensure that students have more practice in working with a range of secondary sources.
2. Faculty teaching Thinking Historically courses are encouraged to increase marginally their attention to the concept of genre and/or be more explicit while discussing with students the importance of genre for historical interpretation.
3. The new Student Learning Outcome for Thinking Historically will read as follows: **Students will be able to analyze historical sources with appropriate attention to their various contexts**.
4. The language of the General Education Combined Document describing Thinking Historically courses will be revised to read:

Courses satisfying this requirement develop students’ awareness and appreciation for the particularities of time and place, a sense of the complex process of change and continuity over time, and the ability to work critically with a range of primary and secondary historical texts. By studying for example specific historical periods, the history of Christianity, the history of academic disciplines, or by taking interdisciplinary courses, students should: become critical readers of a range of historical sources; appreciate the importance of historical context in shaping our understanding of the world in which we live; be able to engage in thoughtful discussions of historical interpretations; and understand the complexity of historical change.

### Interpretive Statement

This must not be simply a course “about” history. While the subject matter may vary, the constant feature must be an introduction to, and practice of, the skills of historical research, criticism, and analysis.

**Committee Praxis**

* In general, GE courses should be open to all Westmont College students having the typical level of preparation.
* However, upper division courses in a major other than History are not inherently ruled out of satisfying the Thinking Historically category. While they are not introductory in the major, they are introductory in the introduction to historical methods.
* Few faculty are trained as historians; therefore, there is a greater burden on courses taught by faculty outside the Department of History to demonstrate that they are, indeed, engaging in “Thinking Historically.” The course (and syllabus) must give explicit and sustained attention to the historical method addressing such issues as particularities of place and time, the interaction of the subject matter with the broader culture, change over time, and the difficulties of interpreting sources.
1. Certification Criterion #2 will be revised to read:

**Identify the arguments of secondary sources and recognize differences in interpretation.**

1. Certification Criteria #3 will be revised to read:

**Articulate responsibly how the past is relevant for the present, drawing informed connections between their study of past events and their bearing on the present.**

1. Students will be able to read primary sources historically – asking and answering basic questions about historical sources (historical context, author, audience, genre); drawing historical conclusions from the sources and assessing their reliability and usefulness; and reflecting on how their own background shapes their interpretation (Thinking Historically Certification Criterion # 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Students will

	* appreciate the contextuality of historical narrative and interpretation – understanding that the ways in which historians tell the story is shaped by their context (intellectual, social, etc.) and recognizing that interpretations of history are subject to change; they will understand the term “historiography” and its implications;
	* articulate with less naiveté how the past is relevant for the present – making connections between their historical study and their responsibilities within the larger world. Students will appreciate what separates us from the past and avoid presentism (Thinking Historically Certification Criteria ## 2 and 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)