

*Academic Affairs*  
*Collegiate Learning Assessment Instructors'*  
*Reports*

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Fayetteville State University

*Year 2009*

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CLA Completion RptDC

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To: Dr. Jon Young  
From: Kim Kirkpatrick, EFL  
Date: May 15, 2009  
Re: CLA Project Completion Report

### **COURSE INFORMATION**

My CLA Performance Task was administered on Feb. 5, 2009, to ENGL322-02, Survey of American Literature 2, a required class for English majors. The class consisted of juniors and one graduating senior.

### **PERFORMANCE TASK**

The task centered on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," which students had read for class discussion at the end of January. Here is the Scenario:

Chris Lewis, Ph.D., a professor of English at General Taiwan University, is writing an article on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" for *New Historicism in English Studies Research Journal*. Dr. Lewis' editor is Jamie Hernandez, Ph.D. In addition to working as an editor, Dr. Hernandez is an assistant professor of 19<sup>th</sup>-Century American Literature at Paolana Institute of Advanced Studies.

Dr. Lewis has made three arguments in the article presented to Dr. Hernandez:

First, Dr. Lewis said that the medical diagnosis of hysteria and its accompanying rest cure imposed upon the story's protagonist is "an example of bad science enforced as a form of discipline and punishment upon 19<sup>th</sup>-century women by Weir Mitchell and the entire patriarchal medical world in cahoots with their own husbands in order to keep the women docile and to hold them as marital captives so that they cannot divorce their husbands nor participate in the feminist politics of the day and therefore they cannot undermine the male-dominance within the household and within society in general." Lewis cites as evidence Alice James' diagnosis of hysteria and imposed rest when she actually had breast cancer. Lewis also cites Henry James' comments from his journal on "the situation of women" and the "inequality" of divorce.

Second, Dr. Lewis said "recognized alternative medical treatments were widely available and certainly, as a medical professional, 'The Yellow Wallpaper's' protagonist's husband, a doctor, would have been aware of these treatments but actively dismissed them to focus on Weir Mitchell's rest cure. Not only does the husband threaten his wife with an personal visit from Mitchell, but he treats her like a child and ignores her requests for another room or at least a re-decoration of the room." Lewis supports this with the Shepperson and Jacques' articles on nursing.

Third, Dr. Lewis wrote that because of the strong correlation between Gilman's writing and Mitchell's subsequent changes in treatment, patients' rights were advanced in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century and doctors began to listen more actively to the medical methods the patient wished to pursue, thereby empowering the patient

with control over her own course of treatment. To support this, Lewis cited Gilman's own statements from "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" and from her autobiography that Mitchell modified his treatment after reading "The Yellow Wallpaper."

Within the document library were two articles by physician Dr. S Weir Mitchell presenting his Rest Cure; two articles from nursing journals presenting alternative and more viable treatments; a first-person diary account of a rest cure patient and a journal entry from author Henry James, who took notes for a novel on the rest cure in order to expose its power over women; and two articles by Gilman on how difficult it was for her to get her work published because "The Yellow Wallpaper" was a political questioning of the patriarchal medical establishment. These last two contained letters exchanged between Gilman and editors.

Students had to engage specific documents within the document library in order to find the flaws in Dr. Lewis' arguments. Students had to interrogate Lewis' arguments and her research from a New Historical theoretical viewpoint and investigate the role of power and politics within "The Yellow Wallpaper" and within the documents of the document library. They had to work with scientific arguments from the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, recognizing the limitations of medical science during that timeframe. The types of documents (the medical science, nursing science, short story literature, anecdotal, journal/diary/memoir, and business letters) required close reading and a recognition of the power relationship between the writer and the intended first audience.

### **PERFORMANCE TASK ADMINISTRATION**

The CLA Performance Task was administered on Feb. 5, 2009. The students' scores were calculated into their final grades and accounted for about 20% of the final grade.

### **STUDENT PERFORMANCE**

The students were very strong in their use of the documents within the document library. Their strengths were Evaluation, Analysis and Synthesis, and Drawing Conclusions. They got hands-on with the documents, quoted from them, and applied them to both Lewis' arguments and to "The Yellow Wallpaper." As these were literature students, their application of the documents to the literature and their discussion of the documents as literature were both very strong. They effectively evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of Lewis' arguments and were able to analyze those arguments based on the evidence from the library documents. Their conclusions were interesting and thoughtful and were not just personal opinions.

The major flaw I saw in the students' work was a desire to credit a positive motivation to all involved in the document collection. They believed that Lewis and Hernandez, and Gilman and Mitchell, were all motivated by goodness and love of women, not from any desire for power, fame, or fortune, and certainly not by anger or a desire for revenge, even when it was clear to me, clear to the textbook editor, clear to jaded historians, that Mitchell wanted prestige and Gilman wanted to bring Mitchell down a notch. Therefore, I would say that the students needed to work on acknowledging alternate motivations for why individuals – physicians, writers, editors – write what they do.

When I discussed the Performance Task with the students, they agreed that the test was much more interesting and useful than most tests given in classes – it made them think and the research that was presented was useful enough that they could use what they produced on the test as the basis of a research project or the start of a senior project or master’s thesis. These students felt as though they were well prepared for the Performance Task primarily because we had covered the format so well during class.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

I plan to continue using this task in this course, and I plan to create similar tasks for other courses. Of all the testing assignments given to the students this semester, this is the assignment for which they produced the best sustained written work. I would recommend that all faculty participate in creating a CLA Performance Task for their classes.