

MSU Departmental Assessment Plan 2007-2009

Department: Media and Theatre Arts

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Degrees/Majors/Options Offered by Department

Major: Media and Theatre Arts

Students choose one of two options:
Motion Picture/Video/Theatre Option
Photography Option

Master of Fine Arts in Science and Natural History Filmmaking

Department of Media and Theatre Arts
Assessment Plan
Spring 2007
Prepared by: Dr. Walter C. Metz

Updated Assessment Plan

This document replaces the department's prior assessment plan, from 2004. Our assessment efforts are conducted both at the individual course levels but also include faculty-wide curriculum discussions at the departmental level.

I. Degree Objectives

The Department of Media and Theatre Arts offers a B.A. degree with two options, one in Motion Picture/Video/Theatre and the other in Photography. We also offer an M.F.A. in Science and Natural History Filmmaking. Each degree and option prepares its graduates to master both the artistic and technical aspects of the visual media, supplemented with an intensive examination of the history, theory, and criticism of their chosen medium. A combination of artistic and technical preparation enables graduates to successfully obtain entry-level professional positions in film and video production and photography.

II. Expected Competencies

A. Discipline

A graduate of MTA has attained a generalist's understanding of the discipline in which he or she graduates. Fundamental appreciation for, and mastery of, the artistic and technical nature of the medium is required. Emphasis on actual production of artwork in the medium chosen by the student is required. Fundamental appreciation for the history of the medium and the major aesthetic and social theories pertaining to its role in society and culture is required.

B. Communication Skills

Graduates are expected to write well, speak articulately, and listen to others. The media we teach are collaborative, and students must be able to work well in groups. Students make formal proposals and presentations in order to defend the aesthetic choices implicit in their work.

C. Problem-Solving Skills

The curriculum in each of the options requires that students progress to take artistic responsibility for the production of work in the medium chosen. The understanding of how value and meaning are expressed in each of the media is required. Critical and analytical skills are required to enable the student to understand critically the work in which he or she has engaged. In addition, the completion of successful art projects in the visual media represent the overcoming of innumerable creative and technical problems which arise in their creation.

III. Student Learning Assessment

Both options in the department already encourage high quality student outcomes by combining an early gate for enrollment control with vertically-integrated curricula. In MPVT, students take challenging first year classes that mix hands-on production (MTA 102: Aesthetics of Film Production and MTA 103: Understanding Photography) with critical studies courses (MTA 101: Film in America, MTA 104: Theatre and Mass Media, and MTA 218: International Cinema). Out of approximately 130 students who begin the MPVT program every year, we use a grade-point average gate to allow 48 students to enter the sophomore year. Thus, only students who have mastered both critical thinking and hands-on production skills can make it through the gate. For the past 2 years, the GPA cut-off for the MPVT program has been a staggeringly high 3.2. Photography employs a portfolio review after two introductory classes (MTA 103: Understanding Photography and MTA 106: Intermediate Black and White Photography). The entire Photography faculty uses an evaluation rubric to select the top 32 students who have applied (typically upwards of 60). In both cases, the gate serves to limit enrollment in the programs to committed students who have demonstrated significant aptitude in the major.

Once admitted to the programs, vertically-integrated coursework stimulates student learning. In the MPVT option, sophomores progress beyond their introductory film production learning in MTA 102 to eight separate craft-oriented courses (Editing, Lighting, Production Design, Writing, Cinematography, Sound, Directing, Acting). The option's commitment is to a broad base of production skills. Rather than tracking students, we ensure that all students in the major understand all of the required components of film production. Then, in their junior year, students learn to package all of these skills into creating artwork. Students are required to take a fiction and a documentary film production course in which they work in groups to make polished films. Students also take an upper-division film studies and a theatre production course in order to enhance the breadth of their knowledge. Finally, students in both the Photography and the MPVT options take a senior capstone course in which they apply to make, and then complete, a professional body of work before they graduate. The maintenance of the high quality of these student capstone productions is the key to our assessment of the skills students have as they leave our programs.

A. Discipline-Specific Knowledge

The required capstone courses in both of the options, MTA 472/472 in MPVT and MTA 473/475 in Photography, mandate the application for, and completion of, an original creative project deemed by the faculty to be of sufficient quality to demonstrate a fundamental mastery of the medium in which the student is working. The senior project is judged by the faculty such that it is work which would be expected of any beginning professional in the field. The department has instituted formal review procedures for the capstone courses such that the faculty meets to discuss the student work, and acts to preserve the strengths of the curriculum and to address its weaknesses. The complete report of this evaluation process will be detailed in the yearly department assessment updates.

B. Communication Skills

All graduates will have satisfied the University's Core Curriculum requirements for writing and oral communication. The students' success in both areas will be measured consistently through evaluation of speaking and writing in all MTA courses. Students construct written proposals for projects, pitch them orally, and present their project results in classroom-based formal critique sessions. In addition, each student is required to take at least one upper-division studies course in which writing and oral presentation is the primary focus.

C. Problem-Solving Skills

Student success in developing critical thinking and analytical skills are measured consistently in the evaluation of student work in all MTA courses. Art production is based on identifying a focus for a creative project, and seeing that vision through to completion. Finally, the capstone project tests a student's problem-solving skills as the last phase of our students' education. The intensive faculty-based workshop model for critiquing student work in these courses is often precisely directed toward evaluating students' abilities to solve problems as they occur in the execution of their major creative projects.

IV. Program Assessment

The department uses multiple instruments for program assessment:

A. Graduating Student Survey

The graduating student survey will be reviewed on a yearly basis and used to direct faculty discussions of the curriculum.

B. Alumni Advisory Committee Meetings

Because we teach an applied discipline, we depend on our graduates in the media business to advise us on trends that our curriculum should address. We have an alumni board which meets each spring with MTA Department representatives and graduating seniors. This meeting also serves to help mentor students with personal contact with our alumni, professionals in the visual media fields. We are also beginning to call the alumni to campus once per year. Our faculty also keeps updated on what changes in the media we should attend to in our courses. As these trends occur it is reflected in new faculty hires and new courses or the revision of our traditional ones. Thus in the above ways we keep our curriculum tuned to the transformations in the media. A case in point is the digital evolution that is rapidly overhauling our shooting and post-production classes as well as influencing our faculty searches.

C. Curriculum Review

Both options have regularly reviewed their curricula on a semester by semester basis. As of 2007, the Photography option has completed a large-scale curriculum review in order to adjust to the turnover of 2/3rds of the tenure-track faculty in the option. These changes have resulted in a much-improved curriculum which addresses the changing nature of photography in the digital age, as well as prior student complaints about the program's

traditional weakness in preparing students for professional work in photography. The MPVT and MFA areas are in the midst of a large-scale curricular review.

D. Individual Course Assessment

At the individual course level, all MTA courses are evaluated by students via Knapp forms. These forms are scrutinized by the Department Advisory Council, which consists of the department head, the two option coordinators, and two faculty representatives, elected by a vote of the entire faculty. The yearly spring DAC meeting, primarily for the purposes of annual review of faculty, also offers an opportunity for the department head, with advice from the department's senior leadership, to assess the effectiveness of each instructor and each class.

V. Implementation Plan

The curriculum changes in Photography have been completed. Curriculum revision in MPVT is underway. Dennis Aig, Film Options Administrator, is chair of the department curriculum committee, and is charged with overhauling both the MPVT and the MFA curricula. It is anticipated that these revisions will be voted on by the faculty by the end of the Spring 2008 semester. These revisions come at the instigation of the MTA Program Review, completed in Fall 2007, and a large-scale survey of the MFA students conducted by MFA graduate student Meigan Goodyer.