Dear Helen:

The following constitutes my assessment procedures for Biology/Humanities 320, Winter, 2010.

At the first class meeting the 52 students were asked to write for 20 minutes on what they considered to be the likely prospect for human beings, their societies, economies, etc. in the next 50 years or so. After 20 minutes all papers were collected and stored for 7 weeks, at which time they were returned to each student.

1. Most students wrote for 10 minutes or less. (35-40)
2. Most students wrote in broad generalities. (35-40)
3. Many students wrote that science and technology would probably solve many problems facing humanity. (20-25)
4. Very few students presented thinking that reflected an understanding of the many issues relevant to the human prospect (e.g., political, social, economic, scientific, technological, ethical, cultural, religious). Most students (45+) considered only one or two issues important in thinking about the matter.
5. Most students (40+) were oblivious to the human prospect as a global issue, and they wrote about the prospect for human beings only in the United States, without any reference to the many elements of diversity in the present reality, or, indeed, reference to the things that all human being have and hold in common.
6. Almost no students (only 4-5) were aware of how interconnected are the problems of diminishing natural resources, population growth, climate change, conflict arising from competition for resources and global/regional/local power, religious intolerance, ethnic intolerance, political social, economic, and ethical differences.

Students were told to begin an extended essay, based on all the course materials, (the text, lectures, all class discussions-Q&A, small group discussions of prompts and papers based on them, very short videos on population growth, the caloric values and economic costs of monthly food in different nations around the world, game and puzzle work to demonstrate cooperative vs. competitive problem solving, etc., and a 35+ entry journal of material relevant to the course materials drawn from world-wide journalism and student comment connecting the material to the course. They were told that the essay needed to be comprehensive in its reference to sources in all the course materials, international in emphasis, and comparative to the initial statement referenced above—i.e., what did they think about the human prospect at the end of the course compared to their initial assessment?

Only one student (out of 52) produced an essay unacceptable for reasons of brevity, over-simplification and vagueness. Three students failed to produce an essay of any length. All others had enough information and understanding to write 10-12 pages of detailed and relevant discussion, most covering all relevant disciplines, and all the global realities. Some students earned lower grades than others for reasons other than command of the course materials, e.g., significant departures from Standard English, insufficient reference to detail, poor organization, inappropriate emphasis on one or two issues or on minor ones, etc.
The differences between individual’s initial judgment about the human prospect and the judgment rendered at the end of the Quarter in the Comments section of the anonymous Course Evaluation give ample demonstration that the course makes a great difference, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in the students’ ability to think about and articulate a fact-based, broadly applicable, and meaningful judgment about the human prospect. I do not plan to make any changes in this process, though the material in the course is always changed to reflect the different concrete details of every succeeding year.

I hope that this will be of use to you.

Best wishes, and thanks, as always,

Henry-York Steiner
Professor of English, Humanities, and Honors