**Assessment in English Literature:**

**Decoding the Discipline for the Cultural Interpretation of Drama**

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When presented with challenging social plays such as Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour* (1934) or Ayad Akhtar’s *Disgraced* (2012), students often struggle with the meaning of the play. They often conclude that Hellman and Akhtar are prejudiced. Though this is a possible interpretation, there is for both of these plays and for the playwrights evidence to suggest that the plays are not meant to be taken at face value; that there is in them a complex social critique. How do we teach students to read against the obvious grain of a text? Decoding the Disciplines as an approach to understanding student learning was developed in the Indiana University Freshman Learning Project. Its’ premise is that it is important to define “bottlenecks,” i.e. places where large numbers of students have difficulty mastering some concept or action that is essential to their success within a given discipline. This paper presents the two interrelated bottlenecks frequently encountered in English literature courses: 1) students’ inability to read against the grain in a given text; and 2) their difficulty in balancing the connections between one piece of textual evidence and an interpretation of the work as whole. I will present two case studies from a drama course and the process of defining the steps or operations students need to master in overcoming each of these bottlenecks. I will discuss how the steps were defined through the use of drama theory and then modelled for the students, the opportunities for practice and feedback, and the role of assessment in the learning process. (Pace & Middendorf, 2004).