Allegories in a Senior English Class
Upper secondary school students in Cleo Barnes' English class are about to begin a 3-week unit on allegories, answering the Essential Question, *Why don't people just say what they mean?* Ms. Barnes is an experienced teacher who is deeply committed to heterogeneous English classes. She uses a variety of assessments to differentiate instruction so that all students can be successful. She also believes that to prepare students for life or schooling after upper secondary school, they must be self-directed learners. Therefore, she plans her instruction to develop independence in her students.

Ms. Barnes teaches three classes of senior English with several students who have special needs. She has two students with severe learning disabilities who have special education assistants working with them in her class twice a week. Four students, three in one class and one in another, have moderate learning disabilities. They receive support for their regular course work in a study skills course. Throughout the day, she has an additional eight students with moderate learning disabilities. These students receive a minimal amount of support through the special education department. She has two students identified as gifted who participate in a special program based on their interests in biology and art. Four other students are at different stages of learning English.

In this unit, students study the concepts of allegories, fables, and symbols while reading and interpreting an allegorical novel in a small group. They then create their own allegory based on some features of those in the books they read. With a small group, they create a Web site that addresses the Essential Question, *Why don't people just say what they mean?* The student Web sites include their creations along with other relevant information and links.

Preparing for the Unit
Unlike many of her colleagues, Ms. Barnes rarely teaches the same book to an entire class. The standards in her area do not mention specific works of literature, but rather focus on skills of interpretation and analysis. She centers literature units on specific skills that are used to make meaning from different types of literature, rather than on a particular literary work. She identifies a list of books that require the proficient exercise of specific skills. Then, she asks students to choose books that interest and challenge them. This practice allows students to choose books that are appropriate for them while they practice the necessary skills at their reading level. It also allows nonnative language speakers to develop their literary analysis skills with texts in their first language, which exposes other students to literature that they might not otherwise hear about.

Through various forms of assessment, including informal observations and standardized test scores, Ms. Barnes has collected sets of novels appropriate for a variety of abilities and, when available, in a variety of languages. Students are generally free to choose a book they like, although in some cases she may discuss alternate choices with them. She encourages all students to challenge themselves when they select their books.

Ms. Barnes is well aware that many of her students will have difficulty in post-secondary educational settings without self-direction and management skills. Teaching those skills is a high priority for her. Students set year-long goals, revising them when necessary, and also set goals for individual units. These goals generally

address reading and writing, along with 21st century skills, such as collaboration, project planning, critical and systems thinking, and creativity.

Students' Stories: Junie's and Tony's Goals
After a brief introduction to the unit, students look through their portfolios and identify areas of strength and weakness to focus on during the unit. Students are encouraged to create goals that stretch their abilities and help them succeed in life as well as in English class.

Junie, a student with severe learning disabilities, works with her teaching assistant to identify three goals that she wants to work on during the unit:
- I will share my ideas with the other students in my small group.
- I will explain more of my reasons when I am writing.
- I will bring my own materials to class every day.

Tony, a student with moderate learning disabilities, writes the following goals:
- I will pay attention to my schedule and do a little bit of work on my project every day.
- I will think of as many ideas as I can before I decide on one.
- I will think carefully about the end of my writing.
- I will follow through on my responsibilities in my group.

Periodically throughout the unit, students look over their goals and reflect in their journals about how well they are doing. Ms. Barnes provides instruction on how to give specific evidence for their conclusions.

Reading an Allegorical Novel
After student groups have selected the novel they are going to read, they must schedule their reading so they can participate fully in class activities. Students with disabilities receive partially completed checklists along with instructions on how to divide the reading into manageable chunks. Since students in Ms. Barnes' classes are expected to take responsibility for their own learning, students are given slightly less scaffolding for these checklists than they received with the previous project.

The focus of this unit is to build the skills necessary for interpreting allegories. Therefore, Ms. Barnes collects information about how her students are thinking about their books in a couple ways. She has students write their questions and thoughts about their reading in journals, which she examines every few days. She also takes notes on students' thinking processes while they discuss their reading. The following sample table reflects the critical thinking skills used by one group of students while discussing the novel *Lord of the Flies:*

	Blake	**Melody**	**Kim** (moderate learning disabilities)
Makes connections with personal experiences to draw conclusions	*Excellent*	*Doesn't really use own experiences, seems detached from the book*	*Made one comparison*
Revises inferences/conclusions with new information	*Not seen*	*Good*	*Not seen*
Provides specific	*Just used one*	*Good*	*Only vague*

examples from the book to support opinions	*example for all conclusions*		*references*
Comprehends events accurately	*Used personal experiences too much in interpreting the book*	*Good*	*None—may not be reading the book*

Ms. Barnes makes some hypotheses from this short observation, which she checks against information from other assessments, such as journal entries and informal interviews. She decides to do a short mini-lesson on providing textual support for interpretations, because that problem appeared in several of her observations. She meets with Kim individually to discuss her reading schedule. She asks Kim's parents to help her keep up with her reading.

Throughout this part of the unit, Ms. Barnes collects data about her students' literary interpretation, self-direction, and collaboration skills. She uses what she learns to provide individual and group feedback, plan instruction, and provide information for support personnel who work with students with special needs. A final essay exam gives her information about her students' literary interpretation skills that she uses when planning future units and when working with individual students.

Creating an Allegory
After analyzing and interpreting their allegorical novels, the students in Ms. Barnes' class use what they have learned about figurative language, symbols, and metaphors to create their own allegories based in part on the novels they read. To allow students to take advantage of their individual skills and interests, she created a rubric that assesses the important components of the project while allowing students the freedom to choose a medium they enjoy working in that challenges them. She uses what she has learned about her students from previous projects to recommend appropriate formats.

Jill, a gifted student, often chooses writing projects because she knows she can do them well. She set a goal for herself this year to take more creative risks. Ms. Barnes knows that Jill is interested in computer graphics and suggests to Jill to try using animation software to produce her allegory. Ms. Barnes encourages Jill to work with a student in the class who has some experience with animation and connects both of them with an online mentor who is a professional animator.

Kenny, on other hand, has mild learning disabilities and has serious problems with writing. He has set a goal of being more careful with his writing, but when he has a choice of projects, always chooses one that requires as little writing as possible. When he works in a group, he usually manages to get someone else to do the writing for the project. Ms. Barnes knows that Kenny is interested in video and suggests that he write a script for an allegory and then videotape it acted out by a group of friends. The opportunity to complete the project with the help of a professional videographer motivates him to do his best on the scriptwriting.

Complex projects such as these require extensive planning by the students. Ms. Barnes provides varying degrees of support for students through checklists and project plan templates. Students who have a history of completing quality work on time are encouraged to create their own project plans that include all of the

necessary information but match their learning styles. Students who have difficulty thinking ahead complete checklists with many items already filled in, while others just have a list of dates and decide what they will have completed by each deadline. All students are encouraged to modify the template to meet their needs as long as they can meet the deadlines that require class participation.

Ms. Barnes provides students with a project rubric that describes her expectations for the students' allegories. She models how to use the rubric to assess the quality of a project and to solicit constructive peer feedback. Throughout the project, students reflect on their progress, addressing specific items in the rubric as well as their goals for the unit. Ms. Barnes uses the information from the reflections to plan student-teacher conferences, teach mini-lessons on metacognition and self-direction, and identify appropriate resources for different students' needs.

Making a Wiki
In the final stage of the project, student groups create Wikis in which they answer the Essential Question, *Why don't people just say what they mean?* and share their allegories. Since this is a group project, Ms. Barnes assesses collaboration skills along with content skills and knowledge. Students also receive a rubric describing the levels of quality by which they will be graded to guide their work. They create their own project plans from scratch and share their plans with other groups for feedback. Ms. Barnes meets with groups to offer suggestions and support for the development of their plans.

While students plan their Web sites, Ms. Barnes uses an observational checklist. Following is an example of one group's collaboration processes:

Date: *January 28*	**Danny**	**Jill** (gifted)	**Ivan** (mild learning disabilities)	**Kim**
Paraphrases what others said in our group to clarify understanding	*Not observed*	*Good*	*Not observed*	*Tries*
Asks probing questions	*Good*	*Good*	*No*	*Tries*
Encourages and values the ideas and opinions of our group members	*Not observed*	*Good*	*Only with some students*	*Excellent*
Expresses opinions and positions without hurting the feelings of others in our group	*Dismissive at times*	*A bit shy*	*Sometimes mocks others*	*Excellent*
Seeks out diverse opinions and tries to come to common understanding	*Not observed*	*Good*	*No*	*Tries*

When Ms. Barnes examines all her observational data, she concludes that nearly all the students could benefit from some further instruction in paraphrasing others' comments. She also notes that Ivan is not working respectfully with his group. She shares her observations in a private conference with him, discusses the benefits of effective collaboration, and asks him to revise his goals to include one to address working successfully in teams.

At the conclusion of the project, students use a collaboration rubric to assess their own group participation and reflect on their learning about the content knowledge and skills. They also think about the development of 21st century skills, such as the

use of technology, collaboration, and creativity. These reflections are used to assess progress on goals and determine new ones.

Throughout this unit, Ms. Barnes uses a variety of formal and informal assessments to help her students meet content standards and reach their full potential. Students assess themselves to become more independent in managing their learning. Students also assess each other to practice providing constructive feedback to their classmates. This integration of assessment and instruction with a focus on processes and content ensures that students with different abilities can be successful.