

QEP Faculty Champion Reporting Template: Fall Semester 2013

Faculty Champion: Alan Brasher

Directions:

Summarize the critical thinking activities that you engaged in by responding to the following questions. Include important details and attach relevant documents if desired. Please return completed reports by Friday, January 10, 2014.

How did you teach critical thinking in your courses?

- Critical thinking goals: In Composition I, I present critical thinking as the foundation of good writing: good writing is not correct writing; good writing is formulating effective communication strategy (correctness is expected but is the most basic expectation). Critical thinking is also essential to refutation; students must anticipate arguments against their positions, pick the most effective point of opposition, and argue against it.
- Teaching strategies: Sentence combining is the basic way to teach sentence strategy; I teach refutation by requiring students to outline opposing arguments on an issue, and then by requiring them to include at least one refutation in their essays.
- Rubrics/other assessment methods: I used a rubric I designed for a sentence combining exercise (included in my assessment report). It was faulty. Effective refutation figures into the grades of essays.

What worked best for you in teaching critical thinking?

Both sentence strategy and refutation worked. They are both essential to the course.

Did you encounter any unanticipated problems in teaching critical thinking?

No problems, but I've been teaching critical thinking in these ways for twenty years—I couldn't conceive of a composition class without these elements.

- How you responded to these problems:

How did the introduction of critical thinking affect student learning in your courses?

- Qualitative assessment results: When students develop options (alternatives) in sentence construction they learn to think about writing more effectively—to express their thoughts more clearly. Developing refutations teaches students to see an issue from multiple perspectives.
- Quantitative assessment results: Inconclusive assessment of sentence combining exercise measuring students' ability to use organizational strategy to affect meaning.

How will being a faculty champion for critical thinking impact your approach to teaching?

So far, not very much; critical thinking is so essential to effective writing that there's not much change. I'll need to get better at creating rubrics.

If you worked with a faculty mentor, who did you work with and how did the mentor assist you?

I worked with Steve Lavender who discussed rubrics with me and shared with me many examples of rubrics from the QEP committee. He helped me understand the basic concept of the QEP and the critical thinking test. We discussed examples from the test and its effectiveness. He participated in the CTL Teaching Circle discussion of critical thinking, leading much of the discussion.

Alan Brasher—QEP project report—fall 2013

For my QEP project, I decided to work with an exercise that blends sentence combining and essay organization. This is an exercise I designed a good many years ago and have used several dozen times. My choice to use an existing project from my course rather than creating a new project serves a couple of purposes: first, it is important to demonstrate that critical thinking is already a strong element in my composition courses, and second, I hope to make the statement that government driven administrative initiatives should not impose on the curriculum for an academic course. As we multiply QEPs over time, we will run the risk of teaching courses composed of a series of modules whose primary purposes are objectives corresponding to administrative initiatives rather than the development of our students' understanding of and facility with the disciplines we profess. Our disciplines will become secondary.

The exercise is a short narrative that is broken into short, often repetitive, statements arranged chronologically but skipping through three different periods of time. Normally, I ask students to combine groups of sentences into single sentences when appropriate, into compound and complex structures, with the option to let some of the short sentences remain uncombined to create sentence variety. The exercise always closes the portion of the class spent on sentence combining, but unlike prior sentence combining exercises, this project requires students to also employ organization strategy, which has already been discussed in class. I instruct the students to break away from strict chronology in their overall arrangement of the narrative, manipulating the time sequence to creating a sense of beginning-middle-end following the introduction-body-conclusion format of traditional academic essays. I also suggest that the meaning of the story will differ according to which portion of time is emphasized in organizational arrangement.

For this project, I decided to assign the Earthworks exercise as homework, without including organizational strategy—they combined sentences to create effective sentences with a variety of structures and lengths. In class, we reviewed their narratives for effectiveness of sentences, both as individual sentences and in relation to the sentences around them. We then engaged in a discussion about what point the story makes. As expected, without any rearrangement of the narrative episodes, there was no clear consensus about the narrative's purpose—it had three potential meanings, none privileged over the others. I then asked them to think about the three potential meanings and to compose two more versions of the narrative, each with a different meaning, each arranged so as to employ organizational strategy to communicate a clear message with their combined sentences. They were allowed to alter their original sentence combinations and structures.

I established a rubric to measure each student's second narratives (both for each student) to determine their ability to employ organization as a means to clear, purposeful communication. I did not assess the students' initial exercise, because the element of critical thinking I am primarily interested in measuring organizational strategy. This exemplifies critical thinking in composition because it requires students to anticipate the ways different readers will respond to the same information arranged differently, that through the employment of various organizational strategies the same information may be employed to make different points.

The results of the assessment are inconclusive. I recognize mistakes I made in setting up the assignment and rubric. It is also likely that several students either misunderstood one element of the assignment or simply chose to do the assignment “halfway” since, as a homework assignment, their performance would have little effect on their course grades.

There were thirty-six graded narratives. Twenty-one students turned in the assignment; one student's narrative was eliminated for not having followed the instructions, four of the remaining twenty students turned in only one narrative. The students scored highest in telling a coherent narrative, which indicates that they recognized the relation of events to each other. However, performance was much lower on the goals I considered the true measures of critical thinking—the ability to communicate through organization and to make a point with the reordered narrative.

	1	2	3	4
Tells coherent narrative		1, 1 2	2, 2 4	17, 13 30
Uses organization to communicate	3, 0 3	7, 5 12	5, 7 12	5, 4 9
Makes a point	7, 3 10	6, 9 15	3, 1 4	4, 3 7

The primary weakness of my rubric is that it records four levels of performance quality rather than three. Scores in the #2 and #3 columns should probably be divided between the next highest scoring range and next lowest. That would create a more reasonable distribution of scores on the second row (9, 12, 15); however, the last row scores would have an almost opposite distribution (17.5, 9.5, 9). The low scores on the final row may suggest that I am too grudging in acknowledging that students made a point in their narratives, since the second row indicates much greater success in using organization to communicate.

If I evaluate this assignment as a critical thinking exercise next semester, I will have to redesign the rubric and consider how I might make the objectives of the assignment clearer. I will also have to reconsider whether “making a point” is a fair measure distinct from “using organization to communicate.”