CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, STANISLAUS

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY AND MODERN :LANGUAGES

MEMORANDUM

DATE: August 15, 2013

TO: Marge Jaasma, AVP/Academic Planning & Analysis

FROM: Andy Young, Chair, GE CT FLC, 2012-13

SUBJECT: Final Report

Summary

Our report initially summarizes the formation, membership, and meetings of the General Education Critical Thinking Faculty Learning Community. The next three sections unpack vagueness regarding the term 'critical thinking' (hereafter CT) by outlining several concepts, definitions, and pressures that generate a wide field of concepts about what constitutes CT. We believe this vagueness has led to misunderstandings that have to potential to negatively impact student learning and to cause unnecessary strife among faculty. Specifically, we outline four different understandings of CT (mostly having to do with scope of subject matter), three sample definitions of CT (that point to different potential learning outcomes), and over twenty pressures (that affect the selection and wording of CT goals and content). Rather than pretend there is a single essence associated with the term 'CT' into which we can honestly jam all of these variables, we chose to make the variables explicit and narrow the scope of our work to a small but important area of inquiry within this broad field of possibilities. This allowed us to abandon fruitless debates about the nature of CT and move to the articulation of a rubric for A3 classes. Our rubric describes the dimensions of CT that we, as experts in this field, believe are essential goals for CT instruction. Although three different departments were represented in this process, we came to an easy consensus on our rubric categories.

Finally, we append our "rubric" to this memo, along with a few additional documents of possible interest. While much remains to be done in clarifying CT at CSU Stanislaus, we believe we've made progress in identifying the sources of confusion regarding what constitutes CT, while at the same time articulating a comprehensive set of goals to guide the assessment and development of foundational A3 courses.

Formation

Marge Jaasma, Interim Associate Vice President/Academic Planning & Analysis, convened the CSU Stanislaus GE Critical Thinking (hereafter CT) Faculty Learning Community in early September 2012. Committee membership included the Chair of the FLC, representation from each academic department currently approved to teach CT (Area A3) courses (Philosophy, English, Communication Studies), the Director of the JSRFDC, and the Faculty Director of GE.

Membership

Andy Young, FLC Chair
Jason Winfree, Philosophy
Zac Gershberg, Communication Studies
Arnold Webb, English
Betsy Eudey, Director of the FCETL
Caroline Mercier, Faculty Director of GE
Erin Littlepage, Staff Support

Meetings
The committee met seven times during the 2012-13 AY.
WASC Core Competencies Retreat (CT and Information Competence). Anaheim. 10/11-12/12. Young, Gershberg, Mercier.
Give Students a Compass Conference. Cañada College. 3/8-9/13. Young, Carter (MJC)
Northern California Symposium on Critical and Creative Thinking. 4/26/13. CSU East Bay. Young, Gershberg, Mercier, Jaasma.

Meaning of 'Critical Thinking'
The term 'CT' is currently used to identify a number of instructional activities. Rather than trying to subsume activities associated with CT under one definition, the committee chose to clarify the differences. Two general understandings of CT emerged during our research: a results-oriented, efficient problem-solving model of CT, and a deep-inquiry model associated with the cultivation of independent human beings. We subdivided these two general understandings into four concepts of what it means to do CT. The categories arise primarily from differences in subject matter and depth of inquiry.

1. CT as good disciplinary thinking
    a. When understood as good disciplinary thinking, CT means thinking more clearly, rigorously, and completely within a discipline. The specific content and strategies of such thinking vary from discipline to discipline. Usually this kind of CT is limited to disciplinary contexts and assumptions, and so "thinking outside of the box" only occurs within the grounding assumptions of the discipline.
2. CT as problem-solving
    a. When understood as a general strategy for improved problem-solving skills, CT can be associated with problem-solving skills in specific disciplinary contexts, or with regard to complex, interdisciplinary, real-world problems. The latter often encourages more holistic and interdisciplinary thinking, but is limited by the context of the given problem. "Thinking outside of the box" here might mean finding a novel solution to a multi-dimensional problem, but will generally not include the possibility of rejecting, or completely reconceptualizing/reframing, a problem.
3. CT as social integration
    a. When understood as a vehicle to promote the social acculturation of students, CT helps and encourages students to think in ways that we hope will make them better informed citizens, and more reliable members of their communities. This equates with improved problem-solving skills and dispositions applied to everyday life, but often does not involve questioning the given social/cultural context and assumptions. Examples of this would be learning how to participate more thoughtfully in the democratic process, and

how to protect oneself from manipulation by advertising, marketing, and political propaganda.

4. CT as independent thinking
    a. When understood as a means for creating independent thinkers, CT involves "thinking about thinking" (the 2,500 year old discipline of philosophical inquiry, premised in the West on the Socratic dictum that an "unexamined life is not worth living"). CT in this mode includes:
        i. Appreciation for the processes of creative and critical thinking as inherently satisfying human activities that are not always linked to objectively productive or assessable outcomes. This aspect of creating independent thinkers works to instill a love of questioning, a fascination for learning, and an eagerness to challenge one's own and others' views, not out of ego-desires, but out of a love of inquiry itself.
        ii. Reflection on values, identity, culture, purpose, and deep philosophical questions.
        iii. Sensitivity to the different kinds of thoughtful responses that are possible in different contexts

Although there are commonalities between the above four concepts of CT, we believe they are related to each other in the way Wittgenstein discussed "Language Games". There are overlaps of meaning, but we lack a single definable essence that could encompass all of these projects that wouldn't at the same time eviscerate each of their unique contributions to the development of students' intellectual capacities. We are concerned that this evisceration of CT content is already happening in many educational contexts. If students are only exposed to a watered-down version of critical thinking—one based on an oversimplified "essential" definition of CT acceptable to all disciplines—students will be hobbled in the development of their intellectual capabilities and their humanity.

As a result of these concerns, our committee chose to focus on what we as GE Area A3 instructors agree among ourselves is the core of what we do and value in this realm. This process led us to a focus on concept four above. Thus, some of the dimensions of our "rubric" will not be appropriate to, or interesting to, faculty focusing solely on one of the first three concepts of CT. While we firmly believe that becoming more self-reflective and self-critical is valuable training in any disciplinary context, and that there are general cross-disciplinary skills to be learned in this regard, we also firmly believe that to treat any one, or combination of, the first three categories as the whole of CT is to fall into an essentialist trap, watering down the potential intellectual challenge CT has to offer students. To exclude category four above and still claim to be "covering" CT, in the context of A3 courses, would be insufficient in our view.

Definitions of CT

Two definitions of 'CT' stood out as particularly important for our committee because they are both mandated by the CSU system, but are not easily reconcilable.

1. EO 1065 is the official CSU interpretation of California Title V language defining GE area A.
    a. "In CT (subarea A3) courses, students will understand logic and its relation to language, elementary inductive and deductive processes, including an understanding of the formal and informal fallacies of language and thought; and the ability to distinguish matters of fact from issues of judgment or opinion. In A3 courses, students will develop the

abilities to analyze, criticize, and advocate ideas; to reason inductively and deductively; and to reach well-supports factual or judgmental conclusions."

2. LEAP goals were developed by a national group and based on extensive input from academic and business leaders. The CSU CO's office has mandated that all CSU campus GE goals now coordinate with LEAP outcomes. LEAP defines CT as follows:
    a. "CT is a habit of mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion."
3. In addition to the two CSU mandated definitions, another definition of CT by Glaser (a prominent thinker in the CT field) exemplifies considerations we believe are important when thinking about CT. Glaser roughly defines CT as:
    a. Attitude (a disposition to think self-reflectively about one's own thinking process), knowledge (how to do the above), skill (the ability to apply this knowledge and attitude in a variety of situations).

Given the variation in this brief sample and in other sources we encountered, our group abandoned the attempt to define CT, preferring instead to describe the important practical goals that have emerged from our experience with A3 courses.

Conflicting Pressures

In addition to the varied understandings of CT noted above, the committee encountered conflicting pressures regarding the role of CT in students' education. Again, rather than add to the confusion by conflating, ignoring, or minimizing these conflicting pressures we feel that clarity will best be served by making these pressures explicit, since they all directly affect the content of CT instruction.

1. How and why?
    a. Political hostility
        i. Some people believe that CT and associated HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills) are designed to undermine traditional cultural authorities, and have thus made explicit moves to reduce or control instruction in these disciplines, especially as exemplified in concept 4 above.
    b. Economic efficiency
        i. Academic administrative leadership appears to be under pressure to deliver undergraduate education with fewer units in a political climate that is not supportive of increased educational funding.
    c. Certification of non-A3 courses to satisfy A3 outcomes without taking A3 units.
        i. Double-counting units is in part related to 'b' above, and is already happening on some CSU campuses.
    d. A3 Pie
        i. On many campuses A3 is now seen as an easy target for new course offerings to increase FTES, even in disciplines that have little formal training in thinking about thinking.
2. Expectations
    a. Employer expectations
        i. Strong evidence is accumulating that employers value CT skills, especially the ability to think with greater levels of complexity and flexibility, and not just within prescribed contexts. This argues for a thorough grounding in CT, including goals associated with concept #4 above.

b. Parental Expectations
    i. We believe that parents (taxpayers) generally wish to see their children well prepared for life as human beings, and not simply as "cogs in the machine". This also argues for concept #4 above, as do the following expectations.
c. Student expectations
    i. Many students desire to grow, learn, and become more self-determining and self-aware individuals. This desire goes beyond the desire to train for gainful employment, to be prudent consumers, and to participate effectively in the democratic process. Students are human beings, not simply objects to be trained, and we found evidence this year that students genuinely wish to be respected in this regard.
d. Academic expectations
    i. Many educators believe it is essential to include CT as part of a genuine liberal arts education—to engage students in liberating and transformative experiences while improving students' thinking within specific disciplines. At the same time, many educators believe we are not doing this well. This feeling of inadequacy generates faculty desires to improve instruction.
e. Societal expectations
    i. A functioning democracy needs an informed and thoughtful electorate, capable of reasoning in complex ways about complex problems.
f. Disciplinary expectations and foundational educational experiences
    i. Faculty trained in philosophy and related disciplines are concerned that important aspects of CT instruction are being sacrificed in the rush to infuse CT across the curriculum. As such, debate has emerged in a variety of settings about whether or not foundational experiences in courses taught by experts (including CT) are an essential part of a student's academic experience. We believe that they are.
g. Disciplinary expertise
    i. The 2,500 year old discipline of thinking about thinking, found in most of the world's philosophical traditions, represents an accumulated knowledge and experience that should not be ignored when teaching thinking about thinking.
h. Learning research
    i. In addition to traditional philosophical expertise there are many fascinating questions now being addressed through a variety of means including neuroscience, assessment, and faculty self-reflections, about how, where and why learning (and what kind of learning) actually occurs in a University context, and outside of the University context. The results of these inquiries will no doubt have substantial impact on how CT is viewed and taught in the future.

3. Administrative
    a. CSU system rethinking of GE
        i. Due to changing demographics, financial support, theories of learning, educational policy goals, etc. the CSU system has been encouraging careful review and reflection of possible innovative GE practices at the campus level. One example would be the "Give Students a Compass" program.
    b. The desire to see skills instruction integrated more effectively across the four-year curriculum

        i. This is sometimes called scaffolding, and our committee was not positioned to take on this issue. Any effort to deal with scaffolding of curricular goals over time will involve a complete rethinking of our GE curriculum, and faculty/department relationships to GE courses. To properly scaffold GE curriculum, for example, we need coherent and informative GE graduation outcomes assessments, the information from which needs to be folded back into a clearly articulated GE program.
    c. CSUS GE APR (2007)
        i. CSU Stanislaus' self-review of the GE program has implications for how we as a campus think about CT area A3.
    d. GE & Assessment
        i. We encountered a lack of clarity about the role of GE at CSU Stanislaus this past year. This became especially apparent in debates regarding the revised GE goals in Academic Senate in the Spring of 2013. We feel GE program goals should be separated from graduation learning outcomes assessment.
    e. CSUS GE Goals (2012)
        i. The initial absence of any explicit reference to CT as a GE goal in the recently proposed GE goals during AY 12-13 was cause for alarm and confusion in this committee, and certainly contributed to our desire to gain clarity about the role of A3 and CT more generally at CSU Stanislaus.
    f. GE Recertification at CSUS
        i. The CO's mandate to recertify GE courses in relationship to new campus GE goals founded on the LEAP model raises a number of procedural, territorial, and quality issues that affect area A3 (Executive Order 1065, CSU Stanislaus GE APR 2008).
4. Other pressures
    a. A3 mandated writing component at CSU Stanislaus
        i. A3 at CSUS has included an argumentative writing requirement for at least two decades. We are ahead of the curve on this point, and believe we should not regress. Other campuses are just beginning to "discover" the power of this marriage.
    b. Type of University
        i. Private and well-funded public Universities are often presented as exemplars in the in curriculum redesign projects and in the development of rubrics, including integration of CT across the curriculum. We believe it is essential to keep in mind that our student body, funding, and administrative structures are often very different from these exemplars. Thus, areas open for experimentation and innovation at a CSU may be very different than those available in other contexts.

    c. Faculty Governance and curriculum
        i. At CSUS several faculty governance committees are involved in curricular development including UEPC, GE Sub, the Assessment Subcommittee, and Academic Senate. Non-governance entities dedicated to encouraging innovative educational practices, such as the Faculty Center, the Office of Service Learning, and OIT, complement these committees. We believe any major long-term efforts

to overhaul CT instruction should be approved through established campus governance processes and informed by all relevant campus stakeholders. This doesn't exclude the possibility of on-going small-scale experimentation with curricular innovation.

Possible Practical Goals

Given the above varied understandings, mandated definitions, and conflicting pressures, the committee looked at three possible outcomes for our work this year:

1. Generate a University-wide CT Graduation outcomes assessment rubric. The committee didn't feel we were ready to take this on without first clarifying our own understanding of CT. In particular, in the absence of the resolution of some of the conflicting pressures mentioned above regarding GE in general we didn't feel empowered to take on this task.
2. Generate a University-wide CT Upper-division outcomes assessment rubric. We abandoned this focus for two reasons: first we could not see a way under current conditions to get any statistically useful information, and second, generating a University-wide CT assessment rubric would require conversations between department, college and university parties, which is beyond the scope of this committee.
3. Create a rubric that makes explicit important learning outcomes for our A3 classes. We opted for this goal because it:
    - Stays within our area of expertise.
    - Respects our area of expertise.
    - Explicitly respects students as human beings.
    - Avoids entanglement in vagueness about CT.
    - Leaves open the possibility that issues with regard to CT, even at the system level, have not been correctly identified; for example, that issues may be pedagogical or budgetary, rather than programmatic.
    - Maintains the integrity of CT A3 instruction and learning by avoiding oversimplified goals.
    - Respects the variability of CT in disciplinary contexts.
    - Provides a resource to other disciplines wishing to infuse aspects of serious CT instruction into their own programs, and/or to reinforce foundational CT skills in upper-division courses in two ways
        - Provides a picture of the field of CT and where specific departmental efforts may fit in.
        - Provides a set of goals that could be used to infuse (or even identify the current presence of) aspects of CT into courses.
    - We strongly encourage departments wishing to infuse more critical thinking into their curriculum to consult directly with faculty trained in this area, and to consult the extensive discipline based content now available. We firmly believe that a rubric, even one that has narrative explanations of rating, is a completely inadequate substitute for such training.

In our process this year we:

1. Delineated the pressures surrounding CT including how it is understood, various definitions, and multiple pressures

2. Acknowledged our practical limitations and focused our work on a reasonable project—A3 goals
3. Brainstormed on "what is important" to us as we teach CT (A3)
4. Sought common ground among the disciplines currently teaching CT
    a. While there were differences we had remarkable consensus, even on the importance of those dimensions often left out of standard CT rubrics
5. Created categories and sub-categories to be applied to a rubric
6. Created a trial rubric
7. Applied our rubric to 3 of our own papers.
8. Exchanged papers to check on reliability within the rating process.
9. Met to revise/clarify our rubric and discuss the possibility of creating a narrative rubric.

Results

We noted a lack of inter-rater reliability in the trial run of our rubric. Despite this, committee members strongly agreed that the rubric does a good job of capturing our teaching goals in A3 and should be clear to anyone teaching A3 content. The discrepancies in rating student artifacts seemed to arise from the varied assignment types for each department (which we believe is a good thing), and the varied dimensions of CT that each assignment was looking at. Attaining a high degree of reliability would require training and understanding of assignment variability. We would encourage more training on how to achieve inter-rater reliability for future working groups.

In conclusion, we believe our work contributes to CT instruction at CSU Stanislaus in two ways:

1. We provided a clear, well organized, and comprehensive list of outcomes for A3 CT courses, a list that can be used to strengthen existing A3 courses and to evaluate future potential A3 courses. This list also provides a summary of possible goals for faculty wishing to reinforce foundational experiences in CT.
2. We mapped the terrain of CT so that faculty in any discipline can begin to situate what they do with regard to CT within this field, while indicating areas faculty may not have thought about for infusing more CT into their curriculum.

Long-term recommendations

1. CT and GE are critical aspects of our students' education, but they are also rapidly moving targets. We recommend that the University set up a mechanism to monitor changes at the university, system, and national levels, tracking how new developments affect our campus' approach to both GE and CT. Such tracking would need to be properly funded.
2. In the spirit of CT, the goals we've articulated should be viewed as flexible and open to thoughtful revision.
3. Our rubric could be used to promote conversations about general graduation CT outcomes assessments if and when this becomes necessary. Obviously, since this would impact all students, all Departments and stakeholders would need to be involved in this conversation. We note, however, our hope that such assessments would conform to rigorous standards of scientific data gathering, if they are to contribute to the creation of reliable data on which to base decisions that can significantly impact student learning. For our rubric to provide this kind of data it would require rater training, sample stratification, and control of variables.
4. We recommend continuing discussion of CT assessment and GE assessment as a clearly shared vision of GE emerges on our campus.

5. If a demand for information on how to infuse reinforcing learning experiences regarding CT emerges on our campus, we should explore the possibility of creating a well-funded faculty development training program, such as those found on other campuses.

Attachments

1. Our rubric
2. Our results
3. LEAP rubric
4. A sample of other university rubrics