

# **IPESL Grant Summary Report**

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## **1. Title of Project:**

*The Art of Thinking Philosophically: Teaching the Skills and Dispositions of Critical Thinking*

## **2. Purpose of the project:**

My project has been (and continues to be) the utilization of the methods and values internal to my field of philosophy, with the aim of improving students' critical thinking skills by way of (i) new instructional materials that integrate such skills into the writing process, and make the evaluation of such skills transparent, and (ii) a new support mechanism that helps students with their writing and functions also as a general resource.

## **3. Results:**

I developed and then utilized my web-based resources in three ways: (i) as instructional material to teach critical thinking, (ii) as a support mechanism for students in their own writing process, and (iii) as a way to make more transparent the criteria I use to evaluate student work.

Students, almost without exception, reported that they found the critical thinking and writing materials to be helpful, and specifically noted that they were helpful in two ways: (1) their anxiety about writing a philosophy paper was reduced, because they had a clear idea of what critical thinking was and how it should be expressed in writing, and (2) they were able to work out the *structure* of their papers working from the basic ideas of critical thinking, and were then able to fill in that structure with the content of the readings and such.

I found that student papers did indeed tend to have a more coherent structure, a structure that suggested that they were evaluating the strength of arguments, discerning the relevant connections between various sorts of claims (descriptions, rules, principles, observations, etc.), recognizing ambiguity and errors of reasoning, and identifying unstated assumptions. Most specifically, I noticed that students were writing much better *thesis statements* in their papers, and I believe that this is the result of the emphasis in my critical thinking resources on the important of a clear thesis. The thesis statement is such an important part of any argumentative essay, that an improvement here has a tremendous overall effect on the quality of student thinking and writing.

But critical thinking is more than just a specific set of skills; it is also a general disposition of open-minded empathy, curiosity, humility, skepticism, honesty, and

intellectual maturity. On this count, I cannot honestly say that I observed any notable enhancement. But I do feel teaching the ‘hard’ skills must come first, and that the attitude of critical thinking is impossible without them.

Overall, the project has increased my interest in teaching critical thinking, and was largely successful in accomplishing its aims.

#### **4. Issues:**

The main difficulty I faced was that in using class time to discuss critical thinking, I had less time to cover the main content of the course. Of course I know that this distinction between ‘method’ and ‘content’ is artificial, and my response to this difficulty was the obvious one of working to integrate the two seamlessly. But still, I continue to struggle with my desire to have students ‘do philosophy’ instead of spending a great deal of time talking *about* what it would ideally be like to ‘do philosophy.’

#### **5. Dissemination:**

I have already developed web-based materials for my project and am now in the process of transferring them to the D2L platform. Since I am increasing using D2L in my courses, this transfer will make everything rather seamless. I will also be participating in a collaborative effort between the Department of Philosophy and some of our colleagues in the English Department to develop the “Valley Writing Project” website, which is being developed by some IPESL grant recipients in that department. I will also seek out opportunities to present some of my findings at a philosophy conference or as a published piece in a philosophy journal.