



IPESL Grant Application
 (Initiative to Promote Excellence in Student Learning)
 Minnesota State University, Mankato

PROPOSAL COVER PAGE

Title of Project: Developing Critical Thinking Through Online Collaborative Activities

Name: Brandon Cooke

Are you full-time faculty in 2006-2007? Yes No
 (fixed-term faculty are not eligible to apply)

Do you plan to return to MSU in 2007-2008? Yes No

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Campus Address: 227 Armstrong Hall

Campus Phone: 389 5520

College: Arts and Humanities

Department: Philosophy

Spring Semester Schedule:

List times when available to participate in Learning Communities and workshops.


Mondays: 11 AM to 4 PM

Tuesdays: 10 AM to 4 PM

Wednesdays: not available

Thursdays: 10 AM to 4 PM

Fridays: not available



 Signature of Applicant

 Signature of Department Chair/Director/Supervisor *unavailable for sig.*

 Signature of College Dean/Vice President *unavailable for sig.*

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IPESL Project Proposal

1. Project Title:

Developing Critical Thinking Through Online Collaborative Activities

2. Project Purpose:

Students typically come into Introduction to Ethics classes with rather poor critical thinking skills, understood here to mean the ability to produce rationally compelling arguments, and the ability to distinguish good arguments from weak and fallacious ones. This is surely due in large part to their having an educational background that emphasizes learning by rote. Although philosophy classes focus directly on developing critical thinking skills, it is unclear how much one introductory philosophy class can move students away from their dominant by-rote learning style.

One obstacle to this, quite simply, is time. Since most Introductory Ethics students do not previously take a course in logic, it is necessary to spend some time giving students the basic logical and critical tools they need to evaluate the course content. But because a certain range of material must be covered in the classroom, many students do not get enough hands-on experience in evaluating arguments. My own teaching experience indicates that by the end of the course, some students are better able to critique arguments, while other students still rely on their ability simply to memorize certain objections and counter-objections to arguments, without being able to demonstrate *why* an argument is or isn't a good objection.

The purpose of my project is to design an ongoing online class project that will give students that hands-on experience necessary for developing critical thinking skills. This will affect approximately 150 students per year, the total enrollment in my Intro Ethics classes.

3. Project Description:

The centerpiece of my project is an internet-based discussion board accompanying classroom instruction in critical thinking. Over the course of the semester, I will periodically post a variety of short argument texts (e.g. a newspaper editorial, a political speech, a section from a philosophical paper) to the board. Students will have a fixed time to post to the discussion board, and attempt to do the following:

1. Identify the main thesis.
2. Outline the structure of the argument.
3. Identify ambiguous terms and missing premises.
4. Determine the truth of the argument's premises.
5. Identify significant objections to the argument.
6. Determine whether those objections can be met.
7. Evaluate the overall rational persuasiveness of the argument.

Students will be encouraged to respond constructively to one another. They will help each other arrive at a joint assessment of the texts' argumentative goals, technique, and overall persuasiveness. I will serve as a hands-off moderator, keeping the discussion

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focused, but letting students do the work. Once they have settled on a set of responses to the 7 tasks above, we will work through an analysis of each passage as a class.

Finally, working individually, students will complete a number of short in-class critical evaluations of arguments. They will receive points toward their course grade based on their online participation and in-class writing.

There is strong evidence that collaborative activities are an effective method for developing critical thinking skills (c.f. Cooper, J.L. (1995). 'Cooperative learning and critical thinking.' *Teaching of Psychology*, 22(1)).

4. Project Assessment:

Early in the semester and again at the end of the semester, students will complete self-assessment surveys of their critical thinking skills, as well as a brief skills assessment (critical reading and analysis of a short passage to determine their ability to accomplish the 7 tasks - above). The in-class writing assignments will allow an ongoing assessment of the project as a whole, and of individual student progress. I will also compare the results of previous course evaluations with those from project-involving courses.

Research also indicates that for critical thinking instruction to be effective, there must be frequent class assessment (c.f. Angelo, T.A. (1995). 'Classroom assessment for critical thinking.' *Teaching of Psychology*, 22(1)). While the project is underway, the in-class writing assignments and online discussion will help to identify effective and less effective instructional techniques, allowing for a modification of teaching as necessary.

5. Dissemination of Project and its Results:

I will post a report of the project and its results to the IPESL website. I will also present the same in a department colloquium, and to an appropriate University forum. I also plan to submit a paper on the project to the journal *Teaching Philosophy*, and for presentation at a national philosophy conference (most likely, for a group session at the American Philosophical Association meeting held by the American Association of Philosophy Teachers, or by the Association for Informal Logic and Critical Thinking).

6. Support of Department/University Goals:

A goal of the Philosophy Department is to develop students' critical thinking skills. This project is aimed at developing discipline-independent critical thinking skills that will make students more effective learners regardless of major. Working collaboratively and having regular indicators of progress should help students appreciate the value of critical thinking.