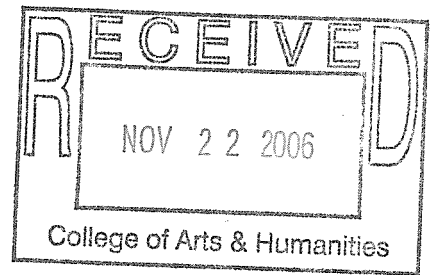


38

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



PROPOSAL COVER PAGE

Title of Project: **Critical Thinking in ENG 271, "Technical Communication"**

Name: **Gretchen Haas**

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

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

e-mail: **gretchen.haas@mnsu.edu**

Campus Address: **AH 230**

Campus Phone: **x5506**

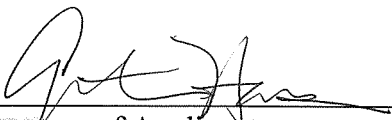
College: **A&H**

Department: **English**


Spring Semester Schedule:

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


The ideal time for me to participate in learning communities and workshops will be on Wednesdays when I am available during the entire day. Other days may be available, but Wednesday is highly preferable.



Signature of Applicant



Signature of Department Chair/Director/Supervisor



Signature of College Dean/Vice President

38

Critical Thinking in ENG 271, "Technical Communication" (Title of Project)

Project Purpose

ENG 271, "Technical Communication," is a service course that enrolls approximately 350 students annually from a variety of majors (e.g., construction management, automotive engineering, computer science). The basic course in technical communication frequently succumbs to the trap of teaching by form, that is, teaching proposals, instructions, and reports by genre – at its most reductive, teaching students to recognize and to use generally accepted formats of professional and technical communication. Although numerous scholars in the field have written against teaching the course in this way, textbooks support this method of teaching and ultimately, it is easier to teach formats than it is to teach students how to *think* about written forms of communication. That this approach persists is surprising (and frustrating) because the rhetorical basis of technical communication is well-suited for a critical-thinking-based curriculum in the premium it places on considering audience, purpose, and context in writing tasks. Nevertheless, it is extremely difficult to get students to think rhetorically, to think critically, about their writing. In this project, I propose redesigning ENG 271 to foster critical thinking in the context of writing tasks to prompt students to do the following: to identify a problem; to identify potential solutions and their implications; to choose a solution and articulate a rationale for that choice; and to reflect on that process. The objective of approaching writing from this perspective rather than the format-based perspective is to have students learn critical thinking and writing skills that can be adapted to a variety of contexts.

Description

Teaching critical thinking lends itself well to situation-based teaching, which is a recommendation articulated by Derek Bok, but also a realization to which I have come while offering a situation-based course this year. Situations, or cases, give students a framework within which to understand and identify problems, to identify solutions and their implications, to choose a solution, and to reflect on the process of working through the scenario.

For this project, I propose developing a scenario-based curriculum to be used as the basis of critical thinking and writing tasks in support of the learning objectives of ENG 271. This project would involve four primary tasks:

- Identify the learning objectives of the course's different units
- Create or identify scenarios (from Couture and Goldstein's *Cases for Technical and Professional Writing*) to support unit learning objectives
- Create a framework for classroom learning activities based on scenarios (i.e., what are the activities in which students will engage in response to scenarios)
- Develop criteria and standards by which to evaluate student performance

I would implement these new curricular materials in the two sections of ENG 271 that I am scheduled to teach during the 2007-2008 academic year.

Assessment

I will administer a scenario-based pre-test and post-test to evaluate students' critical thinking abilities (not their writing facilities). More informally, I will also compare current student learning to past student learning through a comparison of document-based assignment grades.

Dissemination

While I would be pleased to present the outcomes of this work to any MSU community, should the opportunity arise, I definitively plan to disseminate the work within my track. I regularly publish course materials on my Web site and would do the same with these materials to share them with my colleagues in the track as well as with the adjunct instructors who teach ENG 271. Members of the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing also may access these materials since the URLs for my courses are published on its Web site and made available to members.

Support of Department/University Goals

One of my department's goals is "to provide service courses that foster effective reading, writing, speaking, and *critical thinking*." Since this course is a service course that enrolls students from other programs, it will further the English department's mission of fostering critical thinking.