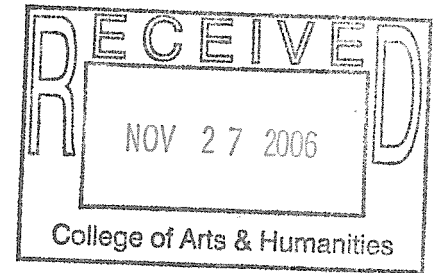


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IPEL Grant Application  
Minnesota State University, Mankato



**PROPOSAL COVER PAGE**

1. Title of Project: **The Art of Thinking Philosophically: Teaching the Skills and Dispositions of Critical Thinking**

Name: **Craig Matarrese**

Are you full-time faculty in 2006-2007? **Yes**  
(fixed-term faculty are not eligible to apply)

Do you plan to return to MSU in 2007-2008? **Yes**

e-mail: **craig.matarrese@mnsu.edu**

Campus Address: **AH 227**

Campus Phone: **2012**

College: **Arts & Humanities**

Department: **Philosophy**

Spring Semester Schedule:  
List times when available to participate in Learning Communities and workshops.

Mondays: **1-5pm**

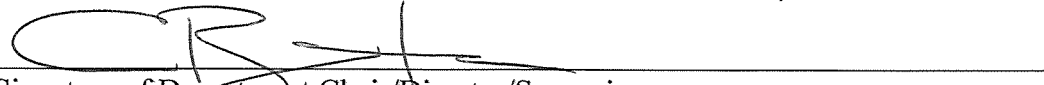
Tuesdays: **not available**


Wednesdays: **1-5pm**

Thursdays: **not available**

Fridays: **1-5 pm**

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Applicant

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Department Chair/Director/Supervisor

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of College Dean/Vice President

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## Proposal Details

**1. Title of Project:** The Art of Thinking Philosophically: Teaching the Skills and Dispositions of Critical Thinking

**2. Purpose of the project:**

The skills, methods, habits, and values of “critical thinking” have rightly been emphasized in recent decades and placed at the center of the modern university’s mission. But although many have thought of critical thinking as a new academic subject matter, it must be pointed out that it is nothing new *to philosophers*; critical thinking has been the essence of philosophy ever since Socrates and Plato made a habit of criticizing dogmatists.

My project, then, is to draw on the methods and values internal to my field of philosophy, and aim to improve 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.

I define critical thinking in two ways: (i) as a set of skills, and (ii) as a general habit of mind. The skills include the ability to evaluate the strength of arguments, discern the relevant connections between various sorts of claims (descriptions, rules, principles, observations, etc.), recognize ambiguity and errors of reasoning, and identify unstated assumptions. The disposition of critical thinking is one of open-minded empathy, curiosity, humility, skepticism, honesty, and intellectual maturity.

The affected student population of my project will be all of the students in all of the courses I teach (roughly 235 per year), plus the general MSU student population, since the online materials will be available to everyone.

**3. Description of the project and how it will enhance students’ critical thinking:**

First, I plan to establish a new support mechanism for improving critical thinking in all of my courses: a website that collects and makes available to all of my students (and MSU students generally) a number of resources that concern critical thinking. The website will function in part as a gateway to other online materials that concern critical thinking, and in part as an accessible location for me to post my own materials on critical thinking.

I will also be integrating the use of this website into my courses along with new instructional materials. Specifically, there a few new instructional materials I hope to develop: (i) a structured assignment designed to teach students how to read texts critically, (ii) materials that help students deepen their critical abilities when writing papers, and (iii) an expanded rubric for evaluating student papers that aims to make transparent the various dimensions of critical thinking.

For both the website and the instructional materials, I will be guided by my experience, over years of teaching, that students typically find it very difficult to read philosophical texts and write philosophy papers. These are difficult tasks for most students precisely because they have little experience with the skills of critical thinking. My hope is that properly structured assignments and detailed writing guides can demystify the process of thinking and writing philosophically. I am also hopeful that my expanded evaluative rubric will enhance and clarify my own communication with students about their papers.

#### **4. Assessment of the completed project:**

I plan to utilize a two-part questionnaire that I distribute to students at the beginning and at the end of the semester. I am mainly trying to understand their initial intuitions about (i) what critical thinking is, whether and to what extent they are able to make the distinction between skills and habits of mind, and (ii) why critical thinking is important, both in and beyond the classroom. The effectiveness of my project can in part be assessed in terms of whether it has had any impact on student attitudes in this regard.

But I will also assess my project by analyzing student performance, determining whether there has been any improvement in the skills of (i) reading philosophical texts critically, and of (ii) writing philosophy papers. I will also solicit feedback from students regarding my expanded evaluative rubric that I will use in grading papers.

#### **5. Dissemination of the project and its results:**

My project and its results will be disseminated in four ways: (1) there will be a continually updated and developed website accessible to students and others, (2) I will seek out opportunities to bring my thoughts and findings to the Philosophy Department, either through colloquia or workshops, and (3) I will seek out professional philosophy conferences appropriate for this sort of research with the aim of submitting a paper, and (4) I hope to develop any conference presentation into an article that I can submit to a professional philosophy journal, e.g., *Teaching Philosophy* or *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines*.

#### **6. How the project supports department/university goals:**

The Philosophy Department seeks to cultivate the skills and dispositions of critical thinking in its majors, minors, and other students who take philosophy courses. The university considers critical thinking to be foundational to the idea of a liberal arts education. My project contributes rather straightforwardly to these goals.