Proposed resolution to the question of Critical Thinking, Logical Reasoning, and Textual Analysis

Context

On January 24, 2018, the Chair of the Committee on General Education brought the following proposal to the University Senate.

Replace the Critical Thinking (CT) competency with two new competencies (LR and TA), defined as follows:

Logical Reasoning (LR) is the organization, interpretation, and evaluation of evidence and ideas within and across disciplines; the drawing of reasoned inferences and defensible conclusions; and solving problems and making decisions based on analytical processes.

Upon completion of logical reasoning course, students will be able to:

1. Identify logical reasoning, distinguishing it from the most common logical fallacies;
2. Analyze and evaluate logical reasoning: identifying assumptions, assessing the quality and reliability of sources of evidence, and demonstrating knowledge of the criteria for evaluation the success of each kind of inference; and
3. Create well-reasoned and well-supported inferences that can be justified.

Textual Analysis (TA) courses focus on sustained engagement with primary and secondary documents, products of creative endeavors, and other human artifacts. Students will develop an understanding of texts within particular disciplines and be able to articulate their own defensible interpretation of those texts.

Upon completion of a textual analysis course, students will be able to:

1. Demonstrate understanding of the text(s) in terms of the discipline;
2. Present a defensible interpretation of a text; and
3. Construct arguments related to critical questions of meaning and value.

Senate Response

Senators expressed reservations about making changes to the new general education curriculum based on two factors: 1. the recently approved general education has not yet been fully implemented and more change could be disruptive or confusing, and 2. there has not yet been an assessment of Critical Thinking, so there is insufficient evidence that change is warranted. To explore these questions and the proposed changes, the Provost hosted a retreat on May 22, 2018.

Critical Thinking Retreat

Twenty-five faculty met to examine the existing definition of Critical Thinking, the proposed Logical Reasoning and Textual Analysis, and the definition of Critical Thinking from the AAC&U. Faculty met in small interdisciplinary groups to look at all of the definitions in relation to the work they are doing in the classroom and through the lens of student work from those classes.

Three recommendations arose from the workshop discussions.
**Recommendation 1**: Reject Logical Reasoning and Textual Analysis.

**Recommendation 2**: Revise the CT definition to better reflect the diversity of disciplines that can support the development of this competency and to include a definition of the term “argument.”

**Proposed Revision**

Critical thinking (CT) utilizes textual analysis and logical reasoning and is, therefore, an intellectual and analytical activity process through which students develop the ability to recognize, examine, critique and synthesize arguments. It consists of two key components: acquiring the skills to assess the clarity, accuracy, relevance, and strength of arguments, and developing habits of mind to utilize those skills. Courses in critical thinking move beyond the mere acquisition of information to the examination of the nature and effectiveness of argument within a specific discipline.

**An argument is a claim, proposition, opinion, or conclusion supported by evidence.**

Upon completion of the Critical Thinking Competency, students will be able to:

1. **Recognize arguments**: Students will distinguish between arguments and unsupported claims or opinions, and identify the central claim of an argument;
2. **Analyze arguments**: Students will determine the components of a given argument and their relation to the whole;
3. **Critique arguments**: Students will evaluate assumptions and the quality and reliability of evidence. They will apply relevant criteria for evaluating different types of arguments, including potential counter-arguments;
4. **Synthesize arguments**: Students will formulate good arguments, which justify positions by bringing together reasons and evidence in a coherent structure that provides persuasive support for a conclusion; and
5. **Apply arguments**: Students will apply critical thinking through a discipline specific method.

**Recommendation 3**: The Committee on General Education should move to develop an assessment cycle that supports revisions of the competencies in a predictable and manageable cycle.

**Workshop Participants**

Art: Jack Tom

Biological & Environmental Sciences: Tom Philbrick

Communication & Media Arts: J.C. Barone, Jackie Guzda, Katie Lever, & Bill Petkanas

Computer Science: Sean Murthy

Economics: Rotua Lumbantobing & Zuohong Pan

English: Anam Govardhan

History and Non-Western Cultures: Jennifer Duffy, Leslie Lindemauer, & Michael Nolan

Management Information Systems: Paul Nugent

Music: Laurel Larsen

Nursing: Linda Dalessio

Social Work: Deneen Harris, Karen McLean, & Rebecca Wade-Rancourt

Theatre Arts: Pam McDaniel & Liz Popiel

World Languages & Literatures: Alba Hawkins

Writing, Linguistics & Creative Process: Kelli Custer, Anthony D’Aries, & Ed Hagan

Moderators: Missy Alexander & Ann Atkinson, Academic Affairs