

Minutes of the LPWG

Wednesday June 4, 2008 – 3 p.m.

Pioneer – McNeill Hall

In attendance: Kedron Bardwell, Cyd Dyer, John Pauley, Mike Hadden, Steve Griffith, Walter Pearson, Nancy St. Clair, Sharon Wilkinson, Jack Gittinger, Lydia Sinapova, Jennifer Nostrala, Amy Doling, Nick Proctor, Jim Thorius, John Bolen, Rick Spellerberg, Bill Friedrichs, Jared Kemper (student representative)

The Academic Dean called the meeting to order and said that we'd start by reviewing and sharing the embedded skills portion that the group worked on. He humorously observed that progress must have been made as more paper and reports have been generated. He noted that the first report in was the report from the critical thinking group. Please also find attached the electronic version of this report to these minutes. Jack Gittinger spoke first for this group and described the critical thinking group's approach which began as defining critical thinking. A reasonable, clear definition was the biggest challenge to the group. Key sources used to help with this process were the Foundation for Critical Thinking and The National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking and the International Center for the Assessment of Higher Order Thinking. The group divided critical thinking into two segments – intellectual skills and dispositions. In defining the skills of critical thinking they used a definition from Bloom and defined critical thinking as a disciplined mental activity involving (a) analyzing and appraising arguments, propositions, and/or data, and (b) making evaluations that guide the development of beliefs and plans for taking action. Therein rests the connection between critical thinking and problem solving. Critical thinking is often the pre-emptive to problem solving. He described performances and behaviors which students exhibit when being good critical thinkers. Again you can see these listed on their report. John Pauley then described how they worked on an overall strategy for building on the embedded skills from year to year. He spoke about how critical thinking could be developed over the four years from a basis in the first year to interdisciplinary activity in the middle years to ultimately a higher level problem solving capstone experience within a student selected domain focusing on a problem (preferably on a controversial social issue). The academic dean asked if the timeline assumes a senior colloquium and John affirmed this. The dean also asked if there would be other courses that could meet the basic introduction to critical thinking other than the LAS first year course. Jack and John said that yes, that was intended. Also, Jack noted that there would need to be a language and understanding among all departments in teaching the skills of critical thinking so there would certainly be other courses that could emphasize the skills. Jack Gittinger said that the first year experience and the fourth year experience would be connected in that the students would have an artifact from the first year and an artifact from the capstone experience giving them the opportunity to self reflect on their progress in critical thinking. Jack Gittinger explained that students would see the change in their level of thinking and approach from merely

receptors of knowledge (high school) to a high order of thinking, analyzing, evaluation (after four years of college) etc.

Walter Pearson questioned what would happen for the graduates who don't take an LAS (e.g. transfer or part time students) Walter noted that about a third of Simpson graduates do not take an LAS class. John Bolen concurred that it is a high number. Jack replied that they hadn't considered that as they had not gone that far in how this will actually be applied. John Pauley said that critical thinking was also an embedded skill that was important enough that more than just LAS classes would meet the qualifications. The dean agreed and said that this is how the problem that Walter described might be addressed with other courses available that would count as such for a transfer student.

Nancy St. Clair liked the dispositions listed on the handout. But she stated that the two dispositions that she had trouble with are intellectual integrity and fair-mindedness. She thinks these should be scrutinized further because these two could lead to a type of rigidity or translate to a conviction. John Pauley thought this a good point.

Steve Griffith thinks these kinds of concerns are valid and we might need to refine the documents before a final document of curriculum change is finished so as to craft the language and hash out the important ideas. Phrasing will take a lot of work, but we can sort out or bring to the top the important ideas now.

Bill Friedrichs asked about the class that all transfer students take. Could the introductions to critical thinking be included in the present transfer forum classes?

Walter Pearson said that the part time students have an introductory course to the college through the evening program. He did not think that these ideas would present a staffing problem for this program.

The dean then asked everyone to go to the information literacy embedded skill.

Sal Meyers stated that information literacy was deemed by the group as key to education and life-long learning and success. Sal reviewed resources that faculty could use. Information literacy could be an important part of many classes and strikes her as a necessary component to the success of critical thinking. Perhaps not all classes will be classes in which it is a big component – it depends on the course. Cyd agreed although she reiterated that it would probably be an integral part of LAS and could be a part of other classes as well.

John Bolen said that when he teaches senior colloquium he expects that the students will have these skills in place. He does not want to be teaching information literacy at that level.

Cyd thinks that people need to know that things are constantly changing and that information literacy in an ongoing process – learning how to process information is evolving.

Sharon Wilkinson said that it occurred to her that in thinking of teaching information literacy heavily in the first year vs. the second year that she thinks first year students have so many independence issues they are working through and dealing with that the emphasis of information literacy might be timelier or a better fit in the second year.

Kedron Bardwell concurred and noted that it seems like it fits better with the mid-level courses rather than introductory courses also.

Walter Pearson said that maybe this should be introduced in the first year but should be in the second year courses in a more comprehensive way.

Cyd Dyer also related that information literacy will not only help students in classes but also will assist them in their personal life (e.g. learning how to get accurate information for personal use too)

Jared Kemper said that he had classes that introduce information literacy skills/techniques and he's also had classes that do not address it. It would be good to have classes set up or identified so that the students would know that this would be a part of the class.

The dean then asked if there were any more comments, and being none, moved the committee to the oral communication embedded skill group.

Amy Doling introduced the oral communication. She said they were very intentional in the idea of oral communication vs. public speaking. Most schools that they researched had public speaking courses in which students gave oral presentations. She noted that the research showed that courses of this type did not help students get jobs or helped them in their future careers. A few schools had separate communication centers that students can utilize, but it seemed that a lot of schools are burying their oral communication skills. Jennifer Nostrala then presented the program at Allegheny College which has a format of 2 first year seminars and a sophomore course to teach written and oral communication skills. She felt presumptive in adding written skills when they were to focus on oral and so they contacted Nancy St. Clair to look at this also and to add some input about a writing component. Nancy described the writing across the curriculum idea where every student takes courses that are writing intensive and not just taught by English professors. She talked about the WAC Clearinghouse and described sample assignments and how these should be developed. The idea is that the more writing the students do the better they get. They deal with mechanical problems they might have and they become fluent writers. Every faculty member has the responsibility to teach good writing. It was noted that there can be a lot of resistance to implementing this.

Jack Gittinger said that it wouldn't take a great deal of imagination to come up with an astounding first year course with what we've heard so far with the several different skill sets presented.

Nick Proctor said that the bookend approach might be problematic. He related that there should definitely be something between the first year program and the senior capstone experience because the time between the first and last year is a yawning chasm of time in college student time and we should probably include a second or third year bridge course. An intermediate topical seminar would help persons to not lose the skills.

The dean said that creating a special course is one way but also persons can teach or deliver the skills in regular courses.

The dean requested at this point that he understood the writing across the curriculum but that he wanted to hear more about the oral communication feature. He asked Jennifer and Amy to tell him more.

Jennifer Nostrala said that it's something that has to be taught early on. She said that faculty often lament that students have a difficult time discussing topics. She said that is the oral communication that is desired --- communication in a group setting rather than presenting in front of a group with notes. She said you have to know and understand what you are speaking about.

Nancy said that material can be presented one way e.g. a student may write well about a subject but then may mumble and stumble when trying to communicate in class and have trouble speaking/communicating.

Sharon Wilkinson said that the tricky thing about this is that the instructor needs to share instructional time and content area in addition to teaching oral communication skills. How one would make this doable could be a challenge.

John Pauley said that we want our students to be able to make presentations in a spotlighted situation but before that we want our students to be conversing members of a community. It wouldn't be construed as an individual activity but rather a community activity – conversing with one another. If we want to create an intellectual community, we have to have people who are ready, willing, and able to converse with one another.

Sharon Wilkinson noted that in her field of languages there are interpretive levels, presentational levels, and interpersonal/conversational levels.

Nancy St. Clair said there is a culture change – in high school we reward students for being quiet, good, and listening --- and then we ask them to come into the college classroom to share their opinion – support it, defend it, get excited about it and the student has no clue. Nancy said that she thinks Sharon is right, though, that time to teach this is limited in the classroom, but the skills are necessary and valuable for good oral discourse.

Rick Spellerberg noted that an area that we could help our students with this is by encouraging collaboration and problem solving. Math modeling teams learn through collaboration in his

area, but he sees even further value in making these interdisciplinary. The conversation and learning that can take place to solve a problem would be opportunities for oral discourse – relating, supporting, and defending positions. Students could hone their skills in these types of situations.

Bill Friedrichs said that it sounds like to him that we are pouring all these ideas into the LAS program. To use LAS as a starting point for all these ideas is too much to ask for any one class – that’s what he hears.

John Pauley said he thinks... “Why not? You could certainly construct a course in which all of the skills were in conflation – writing, speaking, conversing, research, critical thinking – all of the things go together so well and could be a part of a first year class even at a rudimentary level.”

Nancy St. Clair noted the “Is it Crap?” assignment that is a library assignment created by Nick Proctor and located on the LAS web site as a resource. She said it is a wonderful example of learning critical thinking in an introductory way.

Steve Griffith thinks that we are doing a lot of the teaching of embedded skills already – it’s just that we need to be more intentional as a community and agree that certain things will be taught in certain courses.

Kedron Bardwell wanted everyone to think about the untapped areas outside of the classroom for these things to also happen. E.g. students designing forum events would be a great opportunity for leadership, debate style forum events for public speaking dialogue, an academic symposium for oral presentation, May term trip presentations to the community in a Q & A session – maybe if we focus purely on how we get these skills into a course we find we are limited with the time needed, but if we utilize some of these out of the classroom opportunities for augmenting the desired skills we will be able to provide more experience to the student.

Amy Doling said that the students really enjoy hearing faculty talk in the hallways and banter in forum events in an intellectual way. More of these opportunities could be helpful.

Kedron noted that students enjoyed the Gabfests last year.

Nick would agree that for anyone who has gone to a conference and watched someone read from a paper that finding opportunities for students to learn oral communication as well as presentation skills is important.

Jennifer Nostrala said that the definition for communicator was the same for those with oral and written skills. She also thinks both these things can be taught. Students sometimes say “I’m not a good speaker” or “I’m not a good writer” and they think they’re done. But Jennifer believes that both of these skills can be taught.

Lydia Sinapova discussed the difference between writing a paper and presenting a paper. She felt that after writing a paper, oral communication skills would be helped by then speaking about the paper – presenting it to the community, talking about it, answering questions, etc.

John Pauley said that rather than making a presentation that being able to converse about the ideas in the paper is most important.

Nick Proctor said that this route would ensure academic rigor. Nothing exposes someone more than a Q & A for someone who hasn't thought through their ideas.

Steve Griffith noted that he agrees and think this true within the context of the academy, but in speaking to employers they are looking for persons and need someone who can stand up and make professional and clear presentations not only in sales but in all sorts of employment situations.

Nancy St. Clair noted that law schools are requesting that lawyers learn to not just read their closing arguments but that they are able to present them in a conversational style drawing in the jury etc.

Steve Griffith asked the oral communication group if they would work again with the written communication group and flesh out a little more detail for the next meeting. He then moved to the teamwork and collaboration group.

Lydia Sinapova introduced the group research with a handout noting the many opportunities already available on campus for this. She said that they did not find a lot in their research on other college web sites. It may be there but must be buried. Teamwork and collaboration is noted not only in the classroom but outside activity as well through sports, service learning, organizations etc.

Rick Spellerberg then discussed a timeline for exposing students to progressively more challenging problems through the years. He can see cohorts of faculty members and students solving problems. An example he gave was a student who chose as her math modeling project the problem of addressing poverty. An Economics professor attended her presentation and was looking at her model and considered an idea and asked about it from his background in Economics. Rick and the student thought that the model might have been changed and been different had they had this information beforehand. Thus the idea of inter-disciplinary is of great value in problem solving and collaboration. Rick doesn't think we do a good enough job in showing how things connect. He related that he has students who continually ask why they have to take certain core courses – they have no idea why it might be good for them – they don't see connections. If we create an environment of connections, we're not going to have students asking these questions. He said that graduate schools are looking for these kinds of students too. He gave an example of a program from Iowa State University. There is a program funded by the National Science Foundation called Bio- infomatics. There is money available but no

students coming as it is limited to students from the United States. The United States is doing a horrible job in preparing students for teamwork in problem solving at the corporate level and the government level.

Nick Proctor asked if he sees this as something incorporated in their current courses or new courses created.

Rick thought it could go either way.

Nancy said that a lot of people have been doing this on this campus for years.

Rick was not sure about this because of students questioning why they have to take certain courses.

Steve Griffith said that the thing that sounds exciting from this group's research is the inter-disciplinary aspect.

John Pauley noted that a student who is able to reference any number of disciplines competently is at an advantage to address any problem.

Nancy St. Clair agreed and reiterated that Simpson College has already been doing this.

John Bolen said that the concept of learning communities would be an astounding set up when you set up courses as a block.

Rick suggested a commonality – working separately, but getting together once a month to review a project. He said that there was so much he felt he could learn from all the other professors if the opportunity was created.

Sal Meyers said that you can do inter-disciplinary without doing it in a teamwork setting. She also noted that there could be issues such as trust and interpersonal problems to overcome.

John Pauley said that he believes collaborative learning demands teamwork.

Lydia noted that employers want their employees to be able to communicate; to understand one another's ideas; to be tolerant; and to know how to explore. We all have small departments to work as teams.

Steve Griffith said that because of time the committee needed to conclude today's meeting. A meeting was scheduled for Tuesday June 24, 3 p.m., in Pioneer – We will pick up where we left off.

Respectfully submitted,

Shelly Priebe