Transferring Critical Thinking Outside the Classroom
(And Civic Engagement Too!)

CCTL Grant Submission – Academic Year 2015-2016
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I am not receiving any additional funding for this project.

Previous Grants:

2007-2008: “Effectiveness of ‘Analysis Assignments’ versus Pop Quizzes for Promoting Interest in and Ability to Do Philosophy.”


Published in the Proceedings of Niagara University’s 7th Annual International Conference on Teaching & Learning (January, 2008 – not copyrighted). The paper was also presented at that same conference and as part of the Fall 2008 Teaching & Learning Conversation (October, 2008).


2009-2010: “The Effectiveness of ‘Interactive Lecture Quizzes’ (ILQ’s) for Learning Course Material.”

Presented as a poster at Niagara University’s 8th Annual CCTL Conference (January, 2010).

2010-2011: “The Effectiveness of Collaborative versus Private Review of Previous Class Notes.”

Presented at Niagara University’s 9th Annual CCTL Conference (January, 2011).


Presented at Niagara University’s 11th Annual CCTL Conference (January, 2013).

2012-2013: “Debates in Honors Introduction to Philosophy to Improve Writing, Critical Thinking & Speaking.”

After consulting with members of CCTL, I decided not to present this research. This project was a modification of my 2011-2012 research. The modification was unfortunately not successful. I thus had nothing additional to present beyond that which I had presented in January 2013.


Presented at Niagara University’s 12th Annual CCTL Conference (January, 2014).


Presented at Niagara University’s 14th Annual CCTL Conference (January, 2016).

2015-2016: “Visual Argument Maps To Aid Learning Both Philosophical Method And Content.”

This research is currently being conducted in the Spring 2016 semester. It will be presented at the next CCTL conference and perhaps submitted to a journal such as Teaching Philosophy.
The skill of critical thinking is now recognized as one of the most important characteristics employers are hoping students learn in college (cf. Bok 2012, 167ff.; Selingo 2013, 147). This stress on critical thinking, however, gives rise to three challenges. First, it is not clear in what specifically critical thinking consists. Being a so-called “soft skill,” it is difficult to offer a clear definition. This leads to the second challenge: it is not clear how to assess whether students are acquiring the ability to think critically. Finally, there is the concern that any ability to think critically inside the classroom is not easily transferrable to real-life situations outside of the classroom (Gracyk 1997, 153). If a professor is to take a “learner-centered” approach by focusing on what students “need to learn,” however, the ability to transfer this skill outside the classroom should be paramount (cf. Immerwahr 2016, 43).

In the past, the philosophy department decided to define critical thinking as the ability of students to understand logical forms of arguments and recognize logical fallacies. An exam with questions similar to those discussed in class was given to students as an assessment. While this approach had its merits, it failed to address the primary goal that students’ ability to think critically be transferrable to environments outside the classroom. Since a critical aspect of teaching is to make sure our teaching methods and assessments match our true aims (Bok 2015, 187), the goal of my project is to induce the ability to think critically and transfer the logical concepts taught in the philosophy classroom to situations students will encounter throughout their lives. As a side goal, this project will also encourage civic engagement, which is yet another goal of higher education (Bok 2015, 167).

The upcoming election season provides a unique opportunity for me to accomplish these goals. Both political candidates and political commentators are notorious for making emotionally appealing yet logically fallacious arguments. In order to help my students apply their logical skills outside of the classroom, I will require them to watch one of the presidential debates. They must also watch two one-hour cable news shows (I have chosen “Hardball” or “The O’Reilly Factor” since these shows represent both sides of the political spectrum.) After each of these viewings, the students must identify and explain the fallacy in at least four different arguments made during that event or show. This exercise will demonstrate to the students that our classroom material is relevant to the real world and will give them a chance to practice it outside of our classroom. It will be an exercise in transferring their skills to a new
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context. In addition, it should have the effect of making them more likely to critically evaluate claims and arguments they come across during their normal lives. This should cause them to become better citizens and more actively engaged in disputes occurring in society as a whole. The exercises will count for 10%.

This assignment moreover provides a unique opportunity with regard to assessing our department’s goals of developing critical thinking. To explain: logical fallacies are only taught in our introductory courses. Presumably, students in our upper-level courses have already learned these fallacies. I will thus conduct this project in both my introductory and upper-level classes. Not only will this provide an opportunity for upper-level students to review material they have already learned, but it will also allow me to make a comparison between introductory and upper-level students. By comparing the success (i.e. grades) of students in the two levels, I will be able to determine how persistent over time this particular competence in critical thinking is. Another direct measure will rely upon the recently instituted end-of-semester “Logical Reasoning Assessment” given to all introductory philosophy students. The questions on this test were specifically constructed to resemble real-world situations and are not similar to sample questions used during the class. As such, it is a challenging test that cannot be directly taught or studied for. If students who complete my project score higher on it than other students who did not, this will lend support to the hypothesis that my project instills the transferability of critical thinking. Finally, a survey (Appendix A) will provide an indirect assessment of the project’s success.

If successful, the project will contribute to the advancement of active learning at Niagara University by supporting our claim that courses at Niagara not only impart the elusive skill of critical thinking but do so in a way that it is transferrable to outside of the classroom. Moreover, the project will require students to apply their knowledge of logical argumentation to political content; they will perforce be required to integrate two areas of knowledge. This may even make them begin to apply these skills in their other classes that deal more directly with politics (e.g. history and political science). Finally, the project will give students an opportunity to learn about the current election, be more civically engaged, and become less manipulable. I will share the results of my project at the annual CCTL conference in January 2017. Using feedback from that presentation, I hope to submit an article to Teaching Philosophy.
References


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Appendix A

Questionnaire on Political Debates & Logical Fallacies

For this survey, consider the three assignments in which you evaluated political arguments for logical fallacies. Please indicate the degree to which you agree with the following statements by circling the corresponding number.

1. Evaluating the political debates made me better understand logic and logical fallacies than I otherwise would have.

   1 2 3 4 5
   Not at all Somewhat Very

2. As a result of these exercises, I am better able to evaluate arguments and claims made in a variety of settings outside of the classroom.

   1 2 3 4 5
   Not at all Somewhat Very

3. During my day-to-day life, I now find myself more often evaluating claims made by others in terms of their logical consistency.

   1 2 3 4 5
   Not at all Somewhat Very

4. During my normal daily life, I have noticed times at which I would have been persuaded by an argument or claim had I not taken philosophy and learned about logical fallacies.

   1 2 3 4 5
   Not at all Somewhat Very

If you answered 3 or above to #4, answer #5. Otherwise, proceed to #6.

5. To what extent do you think the political debate assignments contributed to there being times at which you were not persuaded by fallacious arguments which would have otherwise persuaded you before having taken philosophy? In other words, how much of a factor did the political debates assignments play in you being able to answer #4 as highly as you did?

   1 2 3 4 5
   Not at all Somewhat Very

6. I am a better critical thinker in my day-to-day life as a result of the political debate assignments.

   1 2 3 4 5
   Not at all Somewhat Very
7. I am more interested in politics as a result of the political debate assignments.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Somewhat Very

8. I have applied my understanding of logical argument construction to material in other classes.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Somewhat Very

9. It is harder for others to manipulate me and my beliefs as a result of the political debate assignments.

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Somewhat Very

10. Please elaborate on the degree to which the political debate assignments made you a better critical thinker in your day-to-day life.

11. Please elaborate on the way in which the political debate assignments helped you contribute or come to new insights in other classes.

12. Please offer any other comments (positive or negative) on the benefits of the political debate assignments.