

INTERDISCIPLINARY "INFORMAL LOGIC" COURSE
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1. Introduction. During the 1978-1979 academic year, I have been involved in designing and teaching an 8-credit, 2-semester course-- "Effective Thinking and Communicating" (ETC) --as part of Fredonia's General-Liberal education Program (GLEP). (GLEP is an experimental alternative to our current General College Program. ETC was originally conceived as a required, combination English Composition/"baby" logic component of GLEP, although we were free to design the course as we saw fit.) During the Fall semester, 5 faculty members were involved: 2 from English and 1 each from Philosophy, Mathematics, and Education; during Spring semester, only the first 4 of these 5 were involved.

The 5 of us met for 6 weeks during the previous summer to plan the course. The prescribed format consisted of one large-group meeting per week augmented by 2 Tuesday-Thursday or 3 Monday-Wednesday-Friday section meetings of about 20 students each per week. While we agreed on general topics and methodologies, we ran our sections as independently as possible within the agreed-upon scheme. During Fall semester, we used Kahane's Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric

(though each of us used it in different ways); for Spring, we are using Scriven's Reasoning, going through it slowly, carefully, and thoroughly. As a bridge between the 2 semesters (which, incidentally, saw a 1/3 drop in enrollment, partially due to scheduling problems), we asked the students to read Ursula K. LeGuin's The Dispossessed.

2. Topics. We began with a discussion of the nature of thinking in general and of "critical" or "effective" thinking in particular.

This was followed by a unit on advertising, during which we discussed unstated implications of ads (using test material from Richard J. Harris, "The Comprehension of Pragmatic Implications in Advertising," Kansas State University Psychology Series, KSU-HIPI Report #76-18A (March 1977)), informal fallacies (material from Kahane), and political ads. The students wrote and produced their own ad campaigns--some "ethical", some intentionally deceptive. There was a large-group meeting presentation by the director of our Instructional Resources Center of an ad campaign he had produced for a small TV station.

We next turned to the New York State gubernatorial campaign. Each student followed a campaign issue, writing essays on the issues, on the arguments used by the candidates, on the nature of politics, and on the candidates themselves. Guest lecturers included a Political Science professor discussing the death penalty (one of the 2 big issues in the

campaign), an Education professor running for county-wide office, and the college president discussing the effect of politics and the campaign on education and the college. Several sections also spent some time carefully and slowly reading and discussing essays pro and con the death penalty.

During the last 2 weeks of Fall semester, some sections did a brief unit on belief-systems and world-views, with exercises designed to help the students make explicit some of their values and beliefs and their interrelationships; some sections concentrated on writing problems; and some held individual teacher-student conferences.

There were also large-group lectures on statistical reasoning and on problem-solving. We used the RCMP letter from this news-letter (Vol. I, No. 1) as a pre/post-test, and had a large-group lecture analyzing it à la Scriven afterwards. The results of the test have not yet been evaluated, though preliminary results, while not strongly positive, did not appear to be negative.

We began Spring semester with (1) a discussion of LeGuin's novel as an example of both problem-solving and the problems that rational thinking must sometimes face and also as a basis for further discussion of opposing belief- and value-systems, and (2) the well-known "Moon Landing" exercise in group-decision making (cf. M. Rubenstein, Patterns of Problem Solving (Prentice-Hall, 1975)). Presently, we are working our way through Scriven, with one of us (the present writer) taking responsibility for the large-group lectures.

3. Methodology. Since the first semester in

particular would count as the equivalent of English Composition for the students, there was much writing--in journals, "free" writing exercises at home and in class, comments on required background readings on the campaign issues, etc. In all sections, the technique of "peer group editing" was employed, with apparent success (though some of us --from English, e.g.--were more familiar with the technique; cf. Peter Elbow, Writing without Teachers (Oxford University Press, 1975)).

In addition, some sections experimented successfully with a version of Scriven's technique of peer evaluation: students exchange papers, evaluate, and grade them, with the instructor grading the evaluation and the original. The students also evaluated and graded themselves (with some teacher input) at the end of Fall semester. (College regulations required a letter grade for each student; we would have preferred Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory.)

4. Remarks. The disadvantages included those attendant upon any interdisciplinary effort, together with the facts that we tried to do too much during Fall semester (the topics actually covered were only a fraction of those envisioned over the summer), and that the administrative support and relief was not maximal (most of us took on the course as a partial overload).

The advantages included those attendant upon any interdisciplinary effort, such as the differing, albeit complementary, approaches to the death-penalty essays; the fact that we had small sections; the fact that we were able to mix the teaching of writing skills with those of logical analysis (albeit with differing emphases and differing degrees of success owing to diverse backgrounds of the instructors); and the leisurely pace with which we approached the logic component, which, we hope, will enable us to get maximum utilization of Scriven's text during Spring semester.

Finally, we have decided to change the format for next year in order (inter alia) to avoid scheduling difficulties, to give participating faculty more freedom, and to make efficient use of faculty expertise. Thus, the present two semesters will meet concurrently: there will be a 3-credit writing-oriented course co-requisite with a 3-credit informal logic course.

(Readers interested in further details are invited to contact the author. I am grateful to my ETC colleagues, Patrick L. Courts, Philip S. Morse, John S. Ramsey, and Jay E. Yellen, for their comments on this report--and for their contributions to the course!)

APPENDIX TO "INTERDISCIPLINARY 'INFORMAL LOGIC' COURSE"

Submitted by Professor Rapaport of the State University of New York at Fredonia.

In a previous number of ILN, I described the first semester of a two semester course entitled "Effective Thinking and Communicating."¹

The second semester (GS 102) concentrated on Scriven's Reasoning. The basic format was as follows: I lectured on the text to the entire group; the students did the A exercises in their journals and turned in selected B and C exercises (frequently supplemented by other assignments); the material was discussed and the assignments were reviewed in the individual sections.

About midway through the semester, there was a student "revolt," possibly brought by the fact that we seemed to them to be repeating much of what we had done the previous semester. Some of the students seemed bored by the text and with what they viewed as its one-sided approach. Although some may have

¹Informal Logic Newsletter, 1 (May 1979): pp. 6-7.

been referring to the classical "cold logic" vs. "warm humanistic" world-views, most seemed to believe (mistakenly, in the opinion of the instructors) that there were other ways to analyze an argument logically. (Many may have been confused about what the duality may have been.)

At this point, we decided to push Scriven to the background for a while. Different sections did different things. My section spent the time discussing a mutually-agreed-upon topic: paranormal (or pseudoscientific) phenomena and scientific method. We implicitly--though not explicitly--applied "Scriven's technique" (i.e., logical analysis) to several articles pro and con the existence of such phenomena. Another section analyzed news editorials and letters to the editor. The students were, however, expected to continue reading Scriven.

For Chapter 6, one of whose points is how to analyze extended arguments, the students were asked to write a long essay on some controversial topic, discussing the background, presenting and evaluating the arguments on both sides, and coming to a reasoned conclusion. (Various sections approached this slightly differently.)

A unit on managing the news (with readings in Kahane's Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric and elsewhere, and a comparison of the ABC radio Information and Contemporary news-service broadcasts), some work on writing problems (including a highly successful essay-assignment on what the students perceived their writing difficulties to be), and self-evaluations/student conferences closed off the semester.

In addition, we showed two highly relevant films (with accompanying writing assignments and discussions): Saul Bass's Why Man Creates and Reginald Rose's 12 Angry Men. The latter is especially relevant to courses which deal with argument analysis, critical thinking, and/or scientific method.

Finally, two testing devices were employed, both published by the University of Illinois Critical Thinking Project:

(1) The Moorburg Letter Test. This is still in an experimental stage. It consists of a letter to the editor with instructions to the student to write a paragraph-by-paragraph reply. A standard scoring sheet is provided. The test was administered to 2 sections of GS 102, a section of an introductory philosophy course, and a section of a semi-formal logic course. Preliminary results indicated that the GLEP (General Liberal Education Program) students did significantly better than either of the other groups.

(2) The Cornell Critical Thinking Test, Level X. This is a multiple-choice test of general critical thinking skills. It was administered to all GS 102 sections and to a section of a semi-formal logic course. Preliminary results indicated that the GLEP students did no worse, and in some cases better, than the other students.