

Faculty Champion QEP Mentor Report for Fall Semester 2013

Faculty Mentor: Linda VonBergen

New Faculty Champion Assisted: Val Czerny

Though I have used *Socratic Logic: A Logic Text Using Socratic Method, Platonic Questions, and Aristotelian Principles* by Peter Kreeft, a Professor of Philosophy at Boston College, as my primary Critical Thinking resource, Val Czerny has used other resources (noted in her report). We decided to use different resources so that we could "cross pollinate" with the best ideas from these resources. (I will later explain how Val and I achieve the same goals for critical thinking in composition classes.)

Kreeft has explained that his critical thinking paradigm is indeed *linguistic*:

It emphasizes the use and understanding of ordinary language. E.g. it devotes considerable time to translating ordinary language into logical form (and it uses the logical form closest to ordinary language) because this is a skill teachers usually assume, but students usually lack (probably because of the decline in the teaching of grammar). I find today's students much more confused by language, and less by mathematical symbols, than previous generations. They are the digital generation, not the verbal. They need to re-learn the logic of language, for thought can no more escape words than fish can escape water. (11)

So when developing lessons on critical analysis of definitions, Val and I take different approaches. Whereas Val begins with a focus on connotation and metaphor, I begin with a focus on denotation and linguistic etymology. For instance, in Composition II, my students must understand the denotations of the terms "feigned" and "reticence" before they can understand how Iago uses "feigned reticence" figuratively (actually rhetorically) to manipulate Othello in Shakespeare's *Othello*. As my approach is formal, I follow Kreeft: he notes that a definition must be "(1) coextensive [with the text], (2) clear, literal [not metaphorical], and brief, and (3) not negative or circular" (124). Though my students could parrot a dictionary definition, I push them to apply it to the context of their essays. Thus, despite our different approaches, Val and I often achieve the same linguistic goal: students begin to understand that both connotation *and* denotation are important because they must consider how to apply both definitions for critical thinking. In other words, because our students live in a changing digital culture, both formal and informal linguistic approaches are necessary for informed, decisive thinking in written assignments.

In our lessons, Val and I also stress close reading for analysis of texts to which students will respond. Kreeft notes the economy of time that results from close reading: "When you read over

the passage, do it slowly and patiently. This [attention] will actually *save* you time in the long run (283, Kreeft's own added italics). Challenging students to "read actively," Kreeft tells them that a book

asks you questions, and you must respond. After you listen (to the data), you must interpret it by asking it the right questions . . . and by understanding its answers. Then you must respond to its arguments, evaluate it, agree or disagree with it. It challenges you. It is not like a piece of prerecorded music to listen to passively, but like a piece of sheet music which you must perform yourself. It is directions for some interactive thinking with its author. (356)

To help students ask questions of a text and evaluate it, I provide Mortimer Adler's "How to Mark a Book" in D2L. I then assess their understanding of Adler's suggestions by asking students to respond to questions about this article. (I will submit this article to our QEP resource link.) With a different approach which focuses on literary terminology, Val assists her students with reading comprehension, and she assesses their improvement. Once again, however, with "cross pollination," we are achieving the same ends.

Because Val and I have discovered that some critical thinking sources stress skepticism without answers, we have agreed that the search for *truth* should be the outcome of evaluating and responding to texts. Kreeft insists that "**logic helps us to find truth, and truth is its own end: it is worth knowing for its own sake. . . . Logic helps us to find truth, though it is not *sufficient* of itself to find truth. It helps us especially (1) by demanding that we define our terms so that we understand what we mean, and (2) by demanding that we give good reasons, arguments, proofs"** (7, Kreeft's own added bolding and italics). In this search for truth, Val and I both ask of our students: "What truths can you learn about yourselves, others, and the larger world?" Despite changes in technology and culture, "mankind is ever the same, and nothing lost out of nature, though everything is alder'd" (Dryden, "Preface" to *Fables Ancient and Modern*). Val and I stress the unmasking of easy skepticism so that our students do the harder work of analyzing and responding to texts to find truth in our composition classes.

Returning to Kreeft's "decline in the teaching of grammar," I believe that composition teachers today must teach grammar for improved critical thinking: students must not only use grammar to present clear ideas for their readers, but also understand grammar for their own evaluation and analysis of texts. (The first century AD English grammarian and stylist Aelfric has noted: "Grammar is the key that unlocks the understanding of books." [As this quotation is commonplace, a citation is unnecessary here.]) Val agrees with me and Aelfric. For example, when reading assigned texts, many of our EGSC students fail to see the main idea in an independent clause because they mistakenly focus on a dependent clause or phrase. So Val and I occasionally teach grammar during class analyses of texts. At other times when students are simply careless with editing their own writing, Val and I refer them to websites where they can practice grammar and receive feedback. I have given Val links to these websites where students

can practice grammar. (Should other QEP Champions want these grammar websites, I will send them via email attachment.)

My mentoring Val Czerny this semester has been a pleasant labor. For as much as I have guided her, Val has helped me. Looking toward the next semester, I plan for us to develop additional emphases on refutation and rhetoric for critical thinking.