

# **DEVELOPING COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGH FOCUSING ON CRITICAL THINKING ACROSS THE BUSINESS CURRICULUM**

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## **ABSTRACT**

As the review of secondary literature indicates, a common goal of business curriculum is to develop employable students who can think critically and creatively as demonstrated by their communication. As critical thinking skills are developed, communication skills are being developed and evaluated as well.

The purpose of this paper is to describe a practical application from a regional comprehensive university of how to develop communication skills through critical thinking by (a) adopting a college-wide critical thinking model, (b) embedding critical thinking learning outcomes at the program level, and (c) implementing specific course pedagogy and assignments to reinforce critical thinking. Specifically identified in the paper are (a) the common model used at the university, (b) specific programmatic course development, and (c) examples of critical thinking assignments.

**Key Words:** critical thinking, communication skills, student learning outcomes, business communication

## **INTRODUCTION**

Research by Paranto and Kelkar (2000, p. 84) led to the conclusion that “employers are more satisfied with graduates who possess core skills, such as creative and critical thinking, interpersonal, and leadership skills, than those who simply possess skills specific to their vocation.” Implementing critical and creative thinking in business curricula is necessary to ensure quality students who possess the ability to “analyze situations from different perspectives, communicate their findings in a clear, concise, and cohesive manner.” (Paranto et al., 2000, p. 84)

Although the need for teaching critical thinking and integrating critical thinking into the business curriculum has been established by multiple research projects, the structure and best practices of teaching critical thinking are still being identified. Richard Paul, critical thinking expert, identified three facts about the current state of critical thinking in higher education. According to Paul (2004),

1. *Most college faculty at all levels lack a substantive concept of critical thinking.*
2. *Most college faculty don't realize that they lack a substantive concept of critical thinking, believe that they sufficiently understand it, and assume they are already teaching students it.*
3. *Lecture, rote memorization, and (largely ineffective) short-term study habits are still the norm in college instruction and learning today.*

To address these issues at a regional comprehensive university, a Quality Enhancement Plan (required for SACS accredited schools) was adopted to infuse critical thinking across all disciplines. This plan is operational at three levels (1) college-wide model of a shared definition of critical thinking, (2) program embedded student learning outcomes, and (3) strategic course facilitation and assignments.

### **COLLEGE-WIDE CRITICAL THINKING MODEL**

The discussion of a college-wide model will identify the need for a common model and the chosen common model.

The need for a model. Considering Paul's research showing that faculty lack an understanding of critical-thinking concepts, the University needed a model that all disciplines could implement. Theories are debated as whether to (a) offer a course specifically designed to teach critical thinking or (b) integrate critical thinking across all disciplines.

Students often have difficulty applying critical thinking across disciplines if the principles are taught in a standalone course (van Gelder, 2005). The difficulty of transferability of the critical thinking concepts to other disciplines had been attributed to the complexity and variations of the definition of critical thinking and the unclear methods of implementing critical thinking concepts (Wright, 2002).

A Common model. At our University, the provost and academic leaders identified a model for critical thinking that serves as a shared definition across all disciplines. The model that was chosen is the Paul Elder Critical Thinking Model. This Model emphasizes the inter-dependent relationship between critical thinking and communication. The Model purports communication is the window to a person's critical thinking. Communication provides a speaker or a writer a channel for expressing his/her thought processes and reasoning. The Model identifies ten Intellectual Standards to apply to the development and assessment of communication.

The Intellectual Standards according to Paul and Elder (2009, p. 17) are:

Clarity	Precision
Accuracy	Significance
Relevance	Completeness
Logicalness	Fairness
Breadth	Depth

These Intellectual Standards provide a common rubric for teaching and assessing critical thinking through communication. They are also consistent with traditionally accepted criteria for

evaluating communication. As critical thinking skills are developed, communication skills are being developed and evaluated as well.

According to Paul and Elder critical thinking is the process of “taking our thinking apart” (2009). They identify the following Elements of Thought (also known as Parts of Thinking) (2009, p. 20):

<b>Purpose</b>	of our thinking
<b>Questions</b>	we are trying to answer
<b>Information</b>	needed to answer the question
<b>Inferences</b>	or conclusions we are coming to
<b>Concepts</b>	or key ideas we are using in our thinking
<b>Assumptions</b>	we are taking for granted
<b>Implications</b>	of our thinking
<b>Points of View</b>	we need to consider

The Elements of Thought guide the critical-thinking process both when a person is receiving (decoding) a message or sending (encoding) a message. The Elements provide a better understanding of the context of the information, the problem, or the decision. After identifying the Elements of Thought, the communication or ideas can be evaluated based on the Intellectual Standards of the Model.

Using the Paul Elder Model as the common model provides a transferable applicable guide to all disciplines. The following examples demonstrate how students may use the Elements of Thought to “take apart” their thinking:

<b>Algebra</b> students, learning the quadratic equation, can ask:
What is the <b>purpose</b> of this mathematical function?
What <b>questions</b> does or can this problem answer?
What <b>information</b> is needed to use this function?
What <b>conclusions</b> can be drawn from working this mathematical function?
What <b>concepts</b> or other mathematical rules are used in this mathematical function?
What <b>assumptions</b> may be made as a result of the application of this function?
What are the <b>points of view</b> regarding the use and proof of the mathematical function theory?

<b>Marketing</b> students, prior to beginning an evaluation of the marketing mix of a company, can ask:
What is the <b>purpose</b> of evaluating the marketing mix of this company (What is the deliverable/outcome)?
What <b>questions</b> need to be answered about the company’s marketing mix?
What <b>information</b> about the marketing mix is provided?
What criteria should <b>conclusions</b> be based on?
What marketing <b>concepts</b> or theories should be used as criteria or basis for the conclusion?
What underlying <b>assumptions</b> need to be explored?
What are the <b>points of view</b> of this completed evaluation?

Students in <b>Business Communications</b> , drafting a report, can ask:
What is the <b>purpose</b> of my report?
What <b>questions</b> should my report answer?

What **information** do I need to provide?  
What do I intend for the audience to **conclude**?  
What **concepts** am I trying to convey?  
What **assumptions** (a) might the audience have and (b) do I have about the audience or the message?  
What are the **points of view** regarding the subject matter of the report?

Through the application of this process students can develop intellectual traits that lead to fair-minded, critical thinkers who can communicate effectively.

### **PROGRAM EMBEDDED STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES**

Our University Strategic Plan directs programs to embed student learning outcomes that focus on critical and creative thinking and effective communication. More specifically our Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP, as required by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools) commits the University to graduate informed, critical and creative thinkers who communicate effectively.

As directed by the University QEP, the School of Business has embedded the development and assessment of these student learning outcomes. Although most courses contribute to these goals, specific courses at each academic level (100-400 Level) are charged with ensuring these essential student learning outcomes are achieved.

#### **One-hundred Level Courses**

The 100-hundred level business courses in the program that are charged with introducing the Paul Elder Model are:

1. Student Success Seminar – First Year Course
2. Introduction to Business

The outcomes of the Student Success Seminar are for students to (1) understand the basic conceptual knowledge of the Paul Elder Model and (2) apply the Model across disciplines.

In the first-year business course, students complete assignments that teach how to apply the critical thinking in any course. For example, one assignment in the Seminar requires students to use the Elements of Thought to analyze a story required for English.

The goals of Introduction to Business are (1) to reinforce the Model and (2) to apply it to basic business content. The Introduction to Business course provides a foundational context for business majors before they enter their business core. The students are required to apply the Elements of Thought to identify the purpose, questions, information, points of view, and the implications of the functional areas of business.

#### **Two-hundred Level Courses**

The Paul Elder Model is used in 200-hundred level courses such as Managerial Accounting to help students understand the *why* of the theory. For example, Managerial Accounting students are required to use the Elements of Thought regarding the Cost Volume Profit Analysis. Students identify the implications the theory has on different functions of business. Students demonstrate their critical thinking through short answers on exams and case study write-ups.

#### **Three-hundred Level Courses**

The 300-hundred level course charged with ensuring students learn to think critically and then communicate their thinking effectively, is Managerial Reports. In Managerial Reports, students are required to write letters and memos, develop research questions, interview executives, present their findings orally, and write a formal report. These requirements are graded based on the Intellectual Standards of the Paul Elder Model.

This course is an assessment point to evaluate achievement of the learning outcomes for critical thinking and effective communication. Students generally report that evaluation and feedback from this writing intensive course is more helpful than feedback from other courses.

The thorough evaluation of students' communication is an assessment tool and learning aid. Students are provided feedback to show:

- how their writing could be made clearer
- whether their writing was biased
- what was and was not relevant in their paper
- how to make their writing precise
- how to make their writing flow and read logically
- the accurate punctuation and grammar

### **Four-Hundred Level Course**

The critical-thinking foundation embedded in 100-, 200-, and 300-level courses facilitates the progression of critical thinking and enables seniors to critically evaluate and create ideas, combining their content knowledge and critical thinking skills developed in their four-year program.

This integration of knowledge and skill is the primary focus of the senior capstone course. This course assesses students' ability to evaluate a business situation using critical thinking and then create a solution. As stated in the course description, GBU 480 Business Strategy, requires students to analyze and formulate business strategy. Students communicate their critical thinking through a presentation of their formulated business strategy and are evaluated based on the Paul Elder Model.

This progression of student learning outcomes help ensure that students are graduating with (a) knowledge of critical thinking, (b) application of critical thinking to theories, (c) application of critical thinking to real-world examples, and (d) evaluation of other's critical thinking. As students develop their critical thinking skills, they are better prepared to determine (a) the information to be communicated and (b) the manner in which to communicate it.

### **STRATEGIC COURSE FACILITATION AND ASSIGNMENTS**

The following examples reflect how business faculty can reinforce critical thinking and communication in the curriculum:

1. Collectively, Critically, and Creatively Explore (CCCE) on Wiki
2. Class Preparation Standards
3. SEEI – State, Elaborate, Exemplify, and Illustrate Learning Activities
4. Rubrics

Collectively Critically and Creatively Explore on Wiki. In a business course, students are divided into teams to evaluate current business articles. The students work collectively on a Wiki space to apply the Elements of Thought to the article. Students are then asked to evaluate the article based on the Intellectual Standards of the Model. The Model guides students to consider

and analyze other perspectives of the issue or information being reviewed. This activity provides a very effective way for students to evaluate their peers' work and to be evaluated by their peers.

Class Preparation Standards. An alternative to requiring students to prepare summaries of chapters in lower-level courses to ensure students are prepared for class is to require them to apply the Elements of Thought to the chapter. Writing a summary is challenging for freshman and sophomores, because they may not understand the content initially. The Paul Elder Model helps students develop their reasoning and analysis of the new content. Students are then better equipped to communicate develop an effective summary.

SEEI. SEEI is the acronym for State, Elaborate, Exemplify, and Illustrate (Elder and Paul, 2009, p. 44). Dr. Martin Luther King used the illustration of cashing a check of justice that had insufficient funds in his famous "I have a Dream" speech. Illustrations such as Dr. King's, provide a common understanding of information being presented and create a visual image for the receiver. Students are often asked in their courses to SEEI the topic or a business issue. This activity develops the students' communication skill of (e.g. clarity and relevance) teaching students to be selective and precise to ensure their thoughts are communicated effectively. The illustration part of the exercise fosters creative thought.

Rubrics. In upper-level business courses, the Intellectual Standards are used as criteria for rubrics in grading students' written and oral communications. Rubrics assist in giving students specific feedback to confirm what they have learned and identify areas for improvement.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS EDUCATION**

As the review of secondary literature indicates, a common goal of business curriculum is to ensure employable students who can think critically and creatively as demonstrated by their communication. However, as Paul explained in his research, a disconnect can exist between the values of the business curriculum and the execution of those values in the classroom. The recommendation for business faculty and higher education administration is (a) to align the college-wide model, program outcomes, and strategic course facilitation with a common critical thinking model, and (b) to systematically embed critical thinking skills in the business curriculum to develop students' effective communication skills.

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