

South University's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP)

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What is the QEP Vision?

To transform the minds of students by helping them become skillful critical thinkers.

To bring this vision into focus, we must be committed to changing the way we teach and the way our students learn. Teaching for critical thinking rather than for content requires a major shift in our approach to teaching. Learning by thinking critically through content necessitates that students first learn how to think critically and then continue developing this intellectual skill as they progress through the curriculum.

How Do You Learn to Think Critically?

The ability to think critically is acquired not inherited, and it certainly isn't natural. Natural thinking is spontaneous, impulsive, reflexive, and unanalyzed. Critical thinking is controlled, systematic, probing, reflective, and analytical. Critical thinking is about reasoning something out on your own by analyzing and assessing your thinking. Critical thinking enhances learning.

We have placed on our QEP Web site (<http://online2.southuniversity.edu/qep>) several PowerPoint presentations and other documents that further elaborate on how to develop critical thinking skills. To access these resources, click on Documents on the main menu.

Why Choose One Model for Critical Thinking?

Various models for critical thinking have been formulated, and while many of them are indeed helpful, it is important to keep focused on one particular model. Otherwise, confusion, frustration, and intellectual diplopia set in. Students have trouble seeing things clearly when going from one model or method to another. It is like learning how to play golf. One first learns the fundamentals of playing golf and then sticks to one particular method for improving his or her skills. Of course, if that method doesn't work, another method is tried. This analogy does not argue for a myopic view on how to learn to think critically; it is a necessary step to take in developing any skill. South University has chosen the Paul-Elder model for developing critical thinking skills in our students because it is clear, logical, precise, and relevant to all disciplines. The model consists of eight elements that are used to reason through or analyze an idea or thought and nine intellectual standards to assess one's reasoning and thinking. Our Quality Enhancement Plan is predicated on the assumption that if our students have opportunities to use the elements and standards of thought through every course they take, they will become skillful critical thinkers, and their learning will have been greatly enhanced.

How Do You Teach for Critical Thinking?

Traditional teaching is didactic in nature. That is to say, those who teach do so through a series of lectures. Lectures focus on content. The student is thrust into a passive learning mode, where the objective is to write down as much as possible of what is being said by the teacher. Just before the exam covering the content is given, the student will spend time memorizing and trying to understand the content. During the lecture very little thinking on the part of the students is taking place because they are busy taking notes. Only when the teacher poses a question in the middle of a lecture do students think, and then, because of undeveloped critical thinking skills, they usually just wonder what the answer might be – the thinking is spontaneous and not critical. Higher order thinking is not occurring. The fact is that when the teacher asks the question, she is actually doing the thinking for the student.

When teachers teach for critical thinking rather than for content, they engage the student in active learning. Students are learning the content by thinking through the content. Students are placed in the position of having to formulate the important and relevant questions themselves. The quality of their learning is directly related to the quality of their questions. The teacher focuses on getting students to understand the fundamental concepts of a subject through which they can think through the content.

How Will the QEP Be Implemented?

Our plan is to start by redesigning the Strategies for Success Course to include an introduction to the basic concepts and tools of critical thinking. The initial offering will be made through a pilot program on all five campuses. After we gather sufficient data and determine what works and what doesn't, we will make appropriate adjustments in the Strategies course before offering it to all students. The next step will be to redesign English composition courses along the same pathway, and then gradually infuse critical thinking into all South University curricula.