QEP FOCUS GROUPS: PROMISING PRACTICES IDENTIFIED

BY THE 1ST CADRE OF FACULTY

A qualitative study

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Broward College

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QEP Focus Groups: Promising Practices Identified by the 1st Cadre of Faculty
by Dr. Deborah Posner, District Director of Institutional Effectiveness

Purpose

This qualitative study involved the first cadre of faculty across Broward College implementing classroom practices for increasing students’ critical thinking skills, as part of the institution’s quality enhancement plan (QEP). The purpose of this study was to identify the most ‘Promising Practices’ found by faculty for increasing students’ critical thinking skills across various disciplines at Broward College (BC). Further, the purpose was to gather information on the estimated Percent of students impacted by the top Promising Practices, which Behaviors or Knowledge were required for the Promising Practice to be effective, what Barriers may have prevented greater effectiveness of those Promising Practices, and what Changes these faculty members would recommend to future implementers for improving the effectiveness. For maximum transparency and value, the findings will be shared with the faculty participants, QEP Implementation Committee, Critical Thinking Learning Society, future cadres of faculty implementing the QEP, college administrators, and BC’s regional body for accreditation – the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC).

Methodology

Of the 21 original faculty members comprising the first cadre, 20 participated in these focus groups (12 in the first focus group; 8 in the second focus group). This represents an excellent 95% participation rate. Both focus groups were held at the end of the first semester of QEP implementation – Winter 2014. Participants were sent calendar invitations for the session which they chose based on what worked best for their schedules. They were also invited to arrive a few minutes early to enjoy refreshments. Minimal to no prior preparation or discussion of the exact purpose of the focus groups was provided to participants in advance.

Both focus group sessions were 1.5 hours long and facilitated by the same individual – Dr. Deborah Posner, District Director of Institutional Effectiveness at Broward College (BC). Dr. Posner was not directly part of the QEP Implementation Committee to that point, nor did any participants directly report to her. There also were no academic administrators or the District Director of the QEP present in the room during either of the sessions. The sessions were not audio or video recorded, and the results and analysis do not tie any responses to specific participants. These strategies were all designed to help ensure validity and reliability of the study by minimizing researcher bias and potential inhibition on the part of the participants.
The setting selected was on-campus classrooms. Participants were arranged in a semi-circle facing the front board, with no tables or other barriers between them and the facilitator, in order to maximize open discussion and interaction. Each participant was provided a nametag, notepad, and pen as they were welcomed into the room. Each session began with brief introductions and an icebreaker question, and a statement of the purpose for the session provided by the facilitator. Participants were then asked to use their pen and notepad to write down their top two most Promising Practices for improving students’ critical thinking skills. This was defined as being anything from a particular assignment, to a general classroom strategy, policy, or technique, etc. It was emphasized to participants that there was no right or wrong answer or type of answer. There was no time limit for this activity and no discussion until after all were done writing. This approach was aimed at allowing adequate time for thought prior to answering, guaranteeing 100% participation, ensuring commitment to initial answers, and avoiding any group-think phenomenon whereby the responses of those answering first may influence others who follow. All Promising Practices were then written by the scribe on the designated ‘parking lot’ area on the side of the board, with no judgment or ranking applied as participants called them out. Clarification or more succinct phrases were sought from the group where needed.

Participants were then asked to walk up to the board and mark via tally format the top 5 Promising Practices they related to on the list (including their own if desired). Tallies from any duplicate Promising Practices were combined, and thus the facilitator identified the top 3 most Promising Practices based on the totals. These top 3 were transferred to the main grid (matrix) which had been pre-drawn on the board by the facilitator. The labels in the headers of the matrix columns were, ‘Promising Practices’, ‘% Impacted’, ‘Knowledge or Behavior Required’, ‘Barriers’, and ‘Changes’. Planned and structured prompts were used following the ‘unfolding matrix’ model for facilitating a focus group (Padilla, 1994). See Appendix for example. The scribe recorded responses on the matrix under the guided direction of the facilitator. The responses were converted digitally via the entire board being photographed at the conclusion of each session, and subsequently transcribed into a Word document. The facilitator then analyzed the data for patterns and trends in repeated terms, phrases, or concepts within the responses. Finally, any overarching themes were sought within each session, as well as across both groups. The results are listed below in different colors for each focus group. A summary analysis follows the results sections.
QEP Focus Group #1 Results
(12 participants)

24 Promising Practices:
(2 per participant)

- Think, Pair, Share model
- Journaling
- Explicit instruction and modeling by instructor
- Role play to evaluate different perspectives (including debate and intellectual standards)
- Application of Hawthorne effect
- Group projects/student engagement
- Elements of surprise
- Group activity
- Questioning assumptions – Answering “how and why”
- Group exercises
- Socratic questioning
- Group role playing and reflection
- Student Involvement
- Student commitment
- Explain expectations up front
- “What ifs”
- See-I exercise
- Debating Events
- Written Assignments
- Incorporating elements of thought and standards of reasoning
- “I-search” research approach
- Reflection
- Thought paper analysis
- Character diagnosis and treatment
Top 3 Promising Practices:

1. **Debating Events**

   - **% Impacted:** 95%
   - **Behavior or Knowledge Required:**
     - Explaining positions
     - Ability to make evaluations
     - Listening skills
   - **Barriers:**
     - Time constraints
     - Ego-centric thinking
     - Literacy level
   - **Changes Recommended:**
     - Explicit, clear instructions and expectations
     - Increase relevance to students
     - Higher grade value/reward
     - Emphasize outside application
     - Frequent feedback
     - Overcoming time barriers
2. **Questioning Assumptions (How, Why, What-If’s, and Socratic Method)**

- **% Impacted:** 90%
- **Behavior or Knowledge Required:**
  - Thinking creatively
  - Open-minded
- **Barriers:**
  - Life (personal issues)
  - Lack of preparation
  - Ego-centric thinking
  - Preconceptions (both students and faculty)
  - How to balance meeting learning outcomes and critical thinking (CT) outcomes
  - Lack of resources for faculty
    - (library of CT practices, evaluation methods, and rubrics for assessment)
  - Lack of opportunity for faculty reflection on overall QEP process
- **Changes Recommended:**
  - Explicit, clear instructions and expectations
  - Increase relevance to students
  - Higher grade value/reward
  - Emphasize outside application
  - Frequent feedback
  - Overcoming time barriers
3. **Student Involvement**

- **% Impacted:** 85%

- **Behavior or Knowledge Required:**
  - Making connections
  - Ability to explain concepts
  - Peer-to-peer interaction
  - Campus resources (labs, LRC’s)
  - Interest in real-life current events
  - Willingness to work with others

- **Barriers:**
  - Misconceptions of current events
  - Time constraints
  - Social/economic preconceptions
  - Shyness/introverts
  - Cultural/language differences

- **Changes Recommended:**
  - Explicit, clear instructions and expectations
  - Increase relevance to students
  - Higher grade value/reward
  - Emphasize outside application
  - Frequent feedback
  - Overcoming time barriers
QEP Focus Group #2 Results
(8 participants)

16 Promising Practices:
(2 per participant)

- See-I Paper Review with critical thinking (CT) standards
- Role play
- Define CT using standards as applied to text and writing
- Metacognition study skills
- CT cameo’s (BC colleagues sharing CT experiences)
- Strong invitation to “dwell in ambiguity”
- Focused questioning/Socratic method
- Guided discussions
- CT prompts for guiding interpretation
- CT safe environment
- Problem-solving CT template (especially in math courses)
- Required time to think through answers
- Allows time for students to derive simple formulas
- Hands on assignments to confirm theories
- Identifying implications and consequences of results
- Establishing connections between different problems
Top 3 Promising Practices:

1. **Requiring Time to Think Prior to Answering Questions**
   - % **Impacted**: 70%
   - **Behavior or Knowledge Required**: 
     - Discipline
     - Patience
     - Listening skills
     - Analytical thought
     - Reinforcement by instructor
     - Identifying that some problems take longer to solve/
       discriminating between problem types
   - **Barriers**: 
     - Lack of discipline
     - Disruption/distraction with cell phones
     - Amount of material to cover during semester
     - Lack of time
     - Lack of preparation
     - Cultural norms
     - Overthinking
     - Comfort level of instructor
   - **Changes Recommended**: 
     - Modeling
     - Explaining benefits
     - Planning opportunities for these moments
     - Start simple
     - Flipped classroom
     - Chances to practice
     - Take advantage of hot topics as they arise
     - Build in intentional silence
     - Require increased student preparation before class
2. **Focused Questions and Guided Prompts (Socratic Method)**

- **% Impacted:** 60%

- **Behavior or Knowledge Required:**
  - Time for reflection
  - Kinesthetic movement/stretching
  - Willingness to interact
  - Becoming less inhibited
  - Seeing shades of gray
  - Using elements of thought and intellectual standards

- **Barriers:**
  - Shyness
  - Lack of engagement
  - Traditional classroom layout
  - Punctuality
  - Substance abuse
  - Lack of depth
  - Greater comfort communicating via electronics than in-person
  - Overthinking

- **Changes Recommended:**
  - Avoid rows in a classroom layout
  - Enforce punctuality
  - Increased structure of assignments
  - Encouraging interaction
  - Safe and welcoming environment
  - Group work
  - Encouraging creativity
  - Use of multimedia
  - Food (providing snacks facilitates more social setting)
3. **Metacognition Study Skills**

- **% Impacted**: 60%

- **Behavior or Knowledge Required**:
  - Willingness to change
  - Ability to reflect
  - Challenging their assumptions
  - Having clear strategies

- **Barriers**:
  - "Life" (personal issues)
  - Job training during class time
  - Ignorance
  - Not seeing value
  - Fixed thinking/mindsets
  - Biases

- **Changes Recommended**:
  - Earlier introduction of technique both to faculty and students
  - Continuous reinforcement
  - Self-evaluation by students
  - Working glossary of CT terms and key tools
Summary Analysis

One clear overarching theme emerged from the responses compiled across both groups – Questioning. This describes the most Promising Practice identified by the entire 1st cadre of faculty who implemented the QEP for the duration of one semester, across multiple disciplines. Questioning included challenging assumptions, debating events, focused and guided prompts by the instructor to encourage deeper thought and analysis, allowing sufficient time for meaningful thought or problem-solving by students before requiring responses, having students consider ‘how’, ‘why’, and ‘what-if’ scenarios, and following the Socratic method. Faculty estimated that the overwhelming majority of students were significantly impacted by this most Promising Practice in terms of improvement to their critical thinking skills. NOTE: This finding is coincidentally and conveniently aligned with the slogan of the college’s QEP: Question Every Possibility (see Appendix for logo). Thus the mission of the QEP seems to have been successfully integrated and demonstrated as effective in initial practice.

Another top Promising Practice was Student Involvement, which included group activities, role playing, and other forms of peer-to-peer interaction as well as class engagement. And a third top Promising Practice identified was Metacognition Study Skills, which included reflection, journaling, self-awareness of thought processes, and having clear strategies to improve critical thinking abilities. The overall top Behaviors and Knowledge Required for the Promising Practices to be effective included open-mindedness, effective listening skills, creativity, willingness to actively participate, and using elements of thought and intellectual standards (Paul and Elder, 2014). Top Barriers to effectiveness included personal life issues, preconceptions and biases, shyness, distraction by cell phones, lack of time, and lack of preparation. Top recommendations for Changes included giving clear and explicit instructions up front, creating a safe and welcoming environment conducive to sharing and interaction, providing frequent feedback and reinforcement, and explaining the relevance, value, and outside application of concepts.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Figure 1. Question Every Possibility. Logo and slogan of BC’s QEP. (Broward College, 2014).

Figure 2. Example of ‘unfolding matrix’ used for QEP Focus Groups at Broward College. (Padilla, 1994).
Figure 3. Critical Thinking Concepts and Tools. Book referenced for guiding principles of teaching critical thinking skills as part of Broward College’s QEP. (Paul and Elder, 2014).

Figure 4. Resource manual for the Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement. One of the key documents with requirements for designing, implementing, assessing, and reporting on the QEP. (SACSCOC, 2012).