

Backstory of Foundations of Reasoning and Knowledge¹

In the fall of 2019, the GE Review Committee (GERC) met with Seaver faculty through division meetings, faculty forums and personal interaction to gather information on what attributes a Seaver College student should acquire through our general education program. Though articulated in many different ways, one of the most commonly stated attributes that faculty would like to see as an outcome had to do with the ability to think clearly, to reason well, to discern truth, etc.

Influenced, perhaps, by a public discourse that is now filled with “alternative facts” and “fake news,” we are concerned with our students’ ability to reason, to think ethically, broadly, deeply and humbly. Our Affirmation Statement reads:

That truth, having nothing to fear from investigation, should be pursued relentlessly in every discipline.

That spiritual commitment, tolerating no excuse for mediocrity, demands the highest standards of academic excellence.²

This pursuit of truth hinges on an ability to reason well. Critical reasoning thus emerged as one of the main attributes that we aim to develop through a revised GE program. In the 2020 General Education Report, the GERC offered the following assessment:

For centuries critical thinking has been front and center in the liberal arts. At Seaver, almost every GE attribute is addressed not only by courses which *feature* that attribute but also by courses which focus on it. (Quantitative reasoning, for example, is addressed by mathematics courses that *focus* on math, and creative imagination is addressed by Fine Arts courses that *focus* on art, even though a range of other courses at Seaver involve math and art.) Critical reasoning is very unusual in that regard. Though, arguably, Seaver has many GE courses that *feature* critical reasoning, Seaver has none whose focus is critical reasoning.

It is also the case that our current curriculum does not have any common framing or scaffolding. While some students demonstrate high levels of competency in critical thinking, this competency is unevenly distributed.³ FRK is intended to address a collective desire and to create a foundation for future intellectual discovery throughout a student’s university career and, indeed, throughout her life.

¹ The naming of this course has generated much discussion. A recent poll was taken of faculty interested in teaching. The two names that received the most approval were Foundations of Knowledge and Reasoning (FRK) and Thinking Well. The GERC has decided to use the former; however, there is still time to decide on a final name.

² <https://seaver.pepperdine.edu/about/our-story/seaver-mission/affirmation/>

³ The Core Competency of “Critical Thinking” was assessed across Seaver College in 2017-2018: https://www.pepperdine.edu/oie/content/pdf/core_competency_data_report_critical_thinking_2017-2018.pdf

All told, this course has three main rationales:

1. To meet a collectively identified need: A focused development of reasoning skills speaks to what we have collectively identified as the fundamental attribute that a Seaver student should develop through our curriculum;
2. To support civil discourse and democracy: The ability to reason well is indeed necessary for a functioning democratic society, and education for democracy has been a part of our curriculum since our founding⁴;
3. To serve as the cornerstone of a liberal education: Reasoning well is the foundation of a liberal arts education and cultivating the life of the mind. We want to ensure that this skill is developed in the first year of college.

Working Course Description of Foundations of Reasoning & Knowledge

As one scholar has put it, “democracy needs citizens who can think for themselves rather than simply deferring to authority, who can reason together about their choices rather than just trading claims and counter-claims. . . . Critical thinking is particularly crucial for good citizenship in a society that needs to come to grips with the presence of people who differ by ethnicity, caste, and religion. We will only have a chance at an adequate dialogue across cultural boundaries if young citizens know how to engage in dialogue and deliberation in the first place.”⁵ This course addresses that need. It does so by cultivating students’ skills in reasoning.

Course Learning Outcomes

Below are several learning outcomes to help guide the course but the overall course goal is simple:

To develop skills in reasoning.

Students who complete this course should be able to:

1. Recognize and articulate various answers to big questions about the nature and sources of human knowledge.
2. Explain both the promise and the limitations of those answers and the perspectives they represent.
3. Enrich those answers and perspectives by drawing connections between the variety of ways in which questions about knowledge have been addressed in different academic disciplines.
4. Separate complex ideas into smaller components and integrate disparate ideas and viewpoints into a coherent whole.

⁴ Baird, David. *Quest for Distinction*. Malibu: Pepperdine UP, 2016. P. 139.

⁵ Martha C. Nussbaum, “Education and Democratic Citizenship: Capabilities and Quality Education,” *Journal of Human Development* 7.3 (2006): 385-395. p. 388

5. Examine and clearly express diverse viewpoints (including their own viewpoint) with intellectual humility, in a way that is sensitive to implications, limitations, and alternative positions.

Structure

In order to achieve the desired learning outcomes in a cohesive manner while also facilitating the participation of faculty from a wide variety of disciplines, a common framework is needed. This framework includes a syllabus with shared components, including shared course outcomes and teaching units. The idea is that the course will have common learning units at the front end. These common units or modules will provide a framework for all students to use throughout the rest of the course and, more importantly, throughout the rest of their coursework at Seaver College and beyond. At the March 16th luncheon faculty expressed a desire to have an ability to use the knowledge and skills developed in this class as a reference point in other courses, e.g. “Remember how in Foundations you learned to...” In order to help facilitate common learning units, we will rely on a shared curriculum, develop a shared “tool box” with ideas and lessons, develop shared activities, attend workshops and hold a yearly symposium (for the initial years). Another idea is to work in pods. This “shared” portion of the course will be especially helpful for developing learning outcomes 1, 2 and 4. Specifically, we seek to equip students to:

- Identify and practice different ways of knowing;
- Evaluate sources of information;
- Identify logical fallacies and learn to avoid them;
- Recognize starting assumptions;
- Understand the way in which emotion factors into our thinking;
- Identify different ways of reasoning and arguing;
- Learn to construct an argument (warrants, evidence, etc.);
- Reflect on reasoning and demonstrate awareness of self limitations;
- Take seriously a different perspective and new idea or evidence;
- Reconcile conflicting information;
- Understand what it means to reason as a Christian

Faculty will also want to bring in their own expertise. The latter part of the course will provide space for faculty to make connections with their specific fields of knowledge. This way, students will hopefully be able to practice these skills and see how they are applicable in multiple contexts..

Support

Support will be needed for this endeavor. The Associate Dean of General Education & Curriculum will oversee the administration of the program: recruiting faculty and facilitating orientation and ongoing training and symposia. Stipends will be provided for first time participants who will need to take part in the initial “retreat” and meetings to develop this course. Much like with First Year Seminar, after the first two or three years of program initiation, an annual meeting will be useful for maintaining unity and sharing pedagogical knowledge.

Assessment

One single overarching learning outcome will be evaluated as part of a regular general education review. In order to facilitate assessment and to provide guardrails for this course, we will administer a pre- and post-course assessment.

Next Steps

It is hoped that the Seaver Faculty Association will approve the general framework of the Seaver Core proposal. There is sufficient interest in participating; over 40 faculty registered interest in teaching. Once the framework is approved, we will continue to refine this course during the AY 2022-2023 year. Participants should expect to participate in some meetings over the course of AY 2022-2023 and AY 2023-2024.