UNC Asheville Inquiry ARC
Update Report for UNC Asheville BOT
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Overview:
I am pleased that I have good news to report from our initial group of Inquiry ARC classes. In our focus group meetings (Sept. 11 & 13 2012) the educator reports were almost unanimously enthusiastic. Educators reported that Inquiry ARC was already having notable results, not only in terms of student learning (e.g. improved depth of engagement in course material and improved clarity in communication), but also in the instructor’s own ability to present material clearly and in an organized fashion. Faculty requested more open-ended (qualitative) assessment in order to capture some of the benefits they are discovering. I’ve worked with some students as well from Anne Slatton and Laura Bond’s team-taught course, and found that they are also responding well to the pedagogies, and are especially pleased with the ways that these skills can translate into other areas of their lives.

This kind of reception was exactly what I was hoping for with the program, and mirrors my own experience in the classroom teaching critical thinking through Inquiry ARC.

Fall 2012 Pilot Educator Update
The first group of pilot educators was selected in spring 2012. Twelve faculty and staff representing a range of disciplines (physics, math, health & wellness, literature, communications, drama, computer science, environmental science, education, and international studies) attended two full-day workshops in May where they were engaged in learning a range of approaches to teaching critical thinking using the Inquiry ARC model. Topics in those workshops ranged from a review of formal logic, to an overview of contemporary models of critical thinking to an introduction to contemplative learning. Pilot educators in those sessions also played a key role in helping us to revise our proposed assessment tools, ultimately resulting in a thorough-going revision of the QEP Assessment Plan and rubrics by Lisa Friedenberg and Jessica Dunsmore in August 2012. The assessment team is currently reviewing those changes, and we plan to have those revisions posted to our website by October 15, 2012.

Those initial workshop sessions were followed by half-day meeting prior to the start of the fall semester, where breakout groups reflected on their class plans, shared insights, and offered further feedback on assessment tools. As I noted above, our recent September check-in meetings revealed that the implementation of Inquiry ARC was resulting in notable improvements in the classes. The framework was helping educators to establish a useful method for structuring assignments as well as entire units, and students were responding well to the focus on critical thinking. As one faculty participant (Michael Ruiz) put it, “Students can sense our enthusiasm for Inquiry ARC, and that enthusiasm in turn is inspiring them.”

The content of our future workshops and training sessions will be modified according to feedback offered by the first pilot group, who were generally positive about the workshops and the training they received. Several felt as though the group spent too much time developing a definition of critical thinking, and also grew a bit impatient with the assessment focus. Luckily, these two aspects of training will be less of a burden to future educators, as we now have assessment tools and a working definition of critical thinking for our campus. Pilot educators highlighted different parts of the training and different aspects of critical thinking as being most useful for their classes. As one might expect, those in math and sciences are finding more application for formal logic, while those in humanities are more comfortable using reflection models. That said, there are some useful interdisciplinary cross-overs as well. For example, environmental scientist Dr. David Gillette is using reflective journals in his course on stream ecology to good effect, and is pleased with how this approach challenges his students to slow down and deliberate on the data they gather from NC streams and
wetland ecosystems. This interdisciplinary element is one of the more invigorating outcomes of the Inquiry ARC, and all of our pilot faculty are were unanimous in their appreciation of the time they spent processing ideas with their peers, and the challenges and opportunity that interdisciplinary discourse allows.

Spring 2013 Pilot Educators Update and Plans
As I draft this update, a new call for participation is circulating for our second group of pilot educators, with applications due today (Sept. 28 2012). This call is intended to reengage those educators who applied last spring, but who were not selected for that initial group. We are capping this group at 10 to help keep the assessment manageable. Training sessions will begin for this group in the form of November reading circles and workshops will follow during the winter break with full and half day workshops.

Members from our education committee are currently working in cooperation with our assessment team to design details the SP 2013 training program. With this new pilot group, we will work to allow more time for the educators to share ideas, setting time aside in the beginning to let the explore their early plans as well as reserving later sessions for meetings to discuss their later, more developed concepts. The content of the workshops take much the same approach, namely offering wide ranging of models of critical thinking to help meet the varied need of our interdisciplinary educators. This group will not bear the same burden of revising assessment tools and defining critical thinking as our first pilot group, but will have more time to apply rubrics and models in experiential (“anchoring”) sessions.

Because we’re working within the constraints of a relatively brief winter term, we’re modifying the first part of the training session in reading circles that will be required of Inquiry ARC Pilot Educators, but open as well to the entire campus community. These sessions (currently under design) will be used to introduce participants to various theories of critical thinking, while the workshop in December will focus on actual classroom implementation of the Inquiry ARC.

I anticipate that future models for educator workshops will follow the summer model, with calls for both spring and fall Inquiry ARC classes circulated in spring, workshops through the summer break, and then then small group meetings during the semester. We will likely add one “warm up” session for those who will apply in spring for the following spring courses, just to make sure those educators have an opportunity to reconnect and update their ideas.

Program Administration
All three of the committee groups have met and follow-up meetings are scheduled for November.

Current activities:
• Reviewing pilot educator applications for SP 2013 classes
• Designing content for SP 2013 pilot team workshops
• Research conferences and other opportunities for development
• Research outside speakers to bring to campus
• Getting the word out and engage students, staff and educators; advertising & marketing
• Website reorganization, development and updating
• Using CT and Inquiry ARC models in SAIL training and orientation
• Revising assessment rubrics
• Developing archives for student samples and pedagogical tools (assignments, exercises, etc.)

Future plans also include:
• Outreach to existing departments/programs/committees for engagement with the QEP (dependent on curricular sustainability redesign)
• Meet with library to start developing resources on campus on critical thinking and Inquiry ARC pedagogies
• Marketing plan
• Student intern for spring semester
• Developing more venues for Inquiry ARC (in student training, etc.)
• Design dashboard for tracking implementation progress

Concerns:

Flexibility vs. Quality Control
Keeping it flexible to minimize the additional work faculty need to do to incorporate Inquiry ARC into their existing classes. Revising classes is always more work, but as long as the payoff is clear, faculty are willing to put in that extra time. This is a balancing act, of course, between building in flexibility and maintaining clear standards for assessment. I think we are at a good point, but this will be a persistent concern.

Organizational structure and continuity
Current organizational structure of committees needs to allow for continuity of membership as well as continuity between the Advisory Committee and two teams. Will be meeting with Senate to discuss how to revise committees with mind to sustainability, representation and continuity.

Engaging the campus broadly
Focus now is on classroom implementation, but hope to do more work with staff involvement, as well as finding other places to directly engage students (e.g. through student organizations, etc.).

Future incentives for participation
Current pilot participants receiving monetary incentives. Will be able to offer some compensation for summer workshop attendance, but needs to have Inquiry ARC incorporated in other areas of rewards (e.g. as a line in faculty records, student, faculty staff awards, etc.)

Report submitted by Lorena Russell, Director of Inquiry ARC