Kent School Curriculum

Instructional Philosophy

The main premise of the curriculum is to provide students strategies to learn challenging materials, to encourage flexibility in the use of knowledge, and to change the underlying ways of thinking. At the end of their studies, students will achieve a deeper, more complex understanding of social work; they will be able to critically evaluate and contemplate the material while experimenting with the flexible application of the knowledge in a variety of contexts. This higher order of thinking that will be developed and promoted with the curriculum is referred to as critical thinking.

This curriculum philosophy responds well to social work as an ever changing and evolving profession which responds to new knowledge on the radically changing needs and demands of society. It is impossible for any curriculum to address each problem or case example social work graduates may face in their practice. Development of cognitive flexibility provides avenues and tools for students to integrate their learning experiences in such a way as to maximize their potential to meet the demands of the profession upon graduation. The curriculum is designed to enhance students' ability to enable the diverse client systems they work with to make decisions that contribute to the quality and health of these client systems. The focus is also on decisions that promote social justice. The curriculum is designed to graduate professional social workers who think critically about what they do, why they do it, and what outcomes they hope will result from their social work practices.
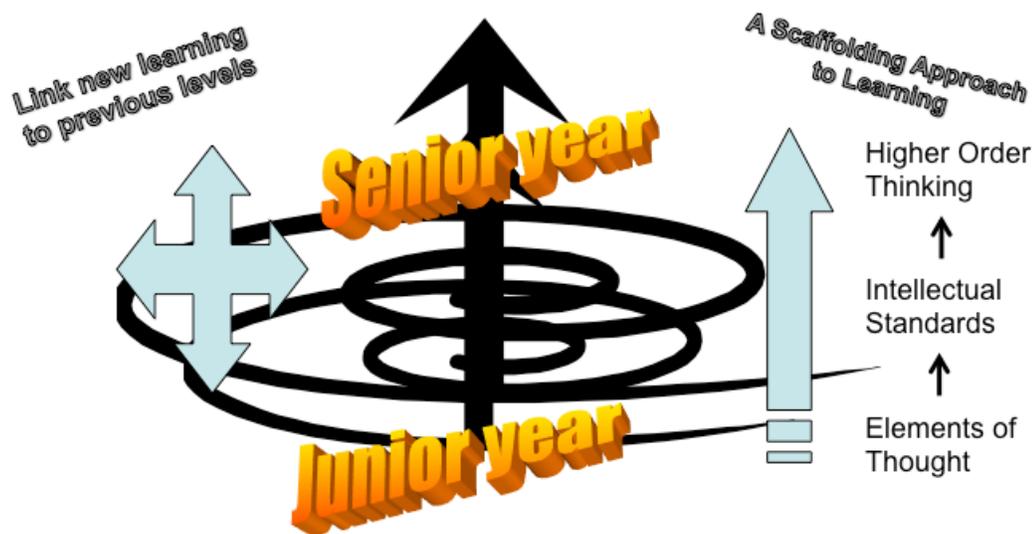
Critical thinking is defined as "the intellectual disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief or action" (Scriven & Paul, 2004).

It includes specific skills such as problem-solving and the ability to integrate knowledge from multiple disciplines and theories of human behavior. Throughout the curriculum, there is an emphasis on critical reflection, or appraisal of various points of view no matter what the source. The curriculum draws heavily on social science knowledge and integrates this with problem-solving phases such as assessment, intervention, and evaluation. In this respect, the curriculum is designed to teach students to access, integrate, and assess practice and policy related research to solve social problems and to work towards social justice. When critical thinking skills are used effectively, it leads to

transparency and promotes social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people.

Bruner's spiral curriculum format (1991) is used to implement the above mentioned cognitive flexibility philosophy in the development of higher order critical thinking skills. With this format, topics are revisited throughout the curriculum, while increasing the level of difficulty, complexity and depth of the area and linking new knowledge or information to previous levels of learning on the same topic to increase the competency of the students. Students are introduced in the junior year to different strategies for developing critical thinking. Examples challenging the critical thinking of students gradually become more difficult in the senior year, with more depth and complexity added to social work problems presented to students for analysis. Schematically, the instructional philosophy is demonstrated in the two figures below. The Paul-Elder (1997) model used in this instructional design has provided clear operationalization of key critical thinking components that ensure that students move systematically through the development of these skills.
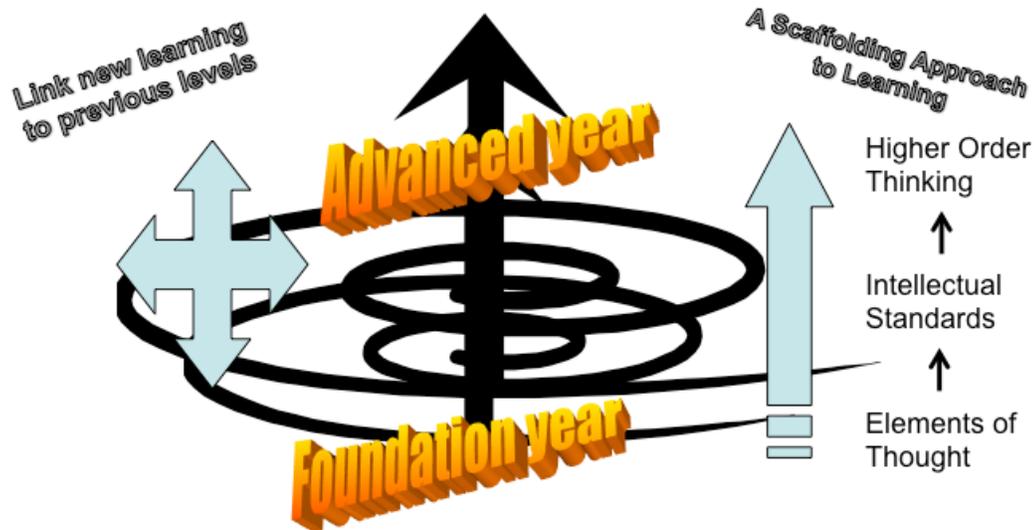
Instructional Philosophy BSW

Bruner's Spiral Curriculum Format (1991)

Instructional Philosophy
MSSW

Link new learning to previous levels

A Scaffolding Approach to Learning

Advanced year

Foundation year

Higher Order Thinking

Intellectual Standards

Elements of Thought

Bruner's Spiral Curriculum Format (1991)

The Paul-Elder (1997) model used in this instructional design has provided clear operationalization of key critical thinking components that ensure that students move systematically through the development of these skills.

According to Paul and Elder (1997), there are two essential dimensions of thinking that students need to master in order to learn how to upgrade their thinking. They need to be able to identify the "parts" of their thinking, and they need to be able to assess their use of these parts of thinking.

The "parts" or elements of thinking (reasoning) are as follows:

- All reasoning has a **purpose**
- All reasoning is an attempt to **figure something out, to settle some question, to solve some problem**
- All reasoning is based on **assumptions**
- All reasoning is done from some **point of view**
- All reasoning is based on **data, information and evidence**
- All reasoning is expressed through, and shaped by, **concepts** and **ideas**
- All reasoning contains **inferences** or **interpretations** by which we draw **conclusions** and give meaning to data

- All reasoning leads somewhere or has **implications** and **consequences**

The intellectual standards to these elements are used to determine the quality of reasoning. Good critical thinking requires having a command of these standards. According to Paul and Elder (1997, 2006), the ultimate goal is for the standards of reasoning to become infused in all thinking so as to become the guide to better and better reasoning.

Habitual application of the intellectual standards to the elements of thoughts produces a well-cultivated critical thinker who is able to:

- Raise vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely
- Gather and assess relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively
- Come to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards;
- Think open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences; and
- Communicate effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems