

A FIPSE-FUNDED NATIONAL INITIATIVE

ICDC

Integrating Civil Discourse into the Curriculum

An introduction for faculty and prospective Fellows

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ICDC

INTEGRATING CIVIL DISCOURSE INTO THE CURRICULUM

ICDC is an experimental test of a fundamentally new model for strengthening civil discourse. The model teaches **sound reasoning** and **respectful dialogue** not as separate pedagogical goals but as **interdependent cognitive skills** that must be **taught together**.



Now being evaluated across **125 campuses** nationwide led by North Carolina State University and the University of Notre Dame, the ICDC curriculum consists of **Thinker** for mastery-based practice in argument analysis, **Sway**, a chat platform for structured one-on-one conversations across disagreement, and **CRIT** for evaluation of student progress.

EXPLORE THE INITIATIVE →

APPLY TO BE A FELLOW →

THE PROBLEM

OUR APPROACH

TOOLS

PARTNERS

THE STUDY

GET INVOLVED

INTRODUCTION TO THE ICDC COURSE

2 MIN. VIDEO

15 MIN. VIDEO

Gary Comstock, North Carolina State University, Director

Suzanne Shanahan, University of Notre Dame, Manager

NC STATE
UNIVERSITY



icdcusa.com

The problem: civility taught without reasoning

Nearly half of U.S. college graduates lack proficiency in critical thinking. Discourse programs ask students to talk across differences without first teaching them to build well-reasoned claims. Critical-thinking courses teach logic in isolation, with no structured practice against someone who disagrees.

The root causes of polarization are not just incivility, but the widespread inability to distinguish sound from unsound reasoning and to revise one's views in light of evidence.

ICDC addresses both.



THE CRITICAL THINKING GAP

Nearly **half of U.S. college graduates** lack proficiency in critical thinking. This persistent deficit particularly affects first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students who often lack the confidence to evaluate arguments constructively.



THE DIALOGUE DISCONNECT

Most discourse programs focus on encouraging students to talk across differences, but they rarely ensure students have the **analytical tools needed to generate well-reasoned claims** before entering conversation.



THE MISSING LINK

Critical-thinking curricula teach logic and argument analysis in isolation, **without structured opportunities** to practice applying those skills in live dialogue with those who hold opposing views.



EPISTEMIC HUMILITY

Students encounter polarized discourse and algorithmic echo chambers. Many learn to **defend inherited views rather than evaluate evidence impartially**, eroding their openness to revision and capacity for intellectual collaboration.

icdcusa.com, The Problem



Our approach: teach reasoning and dialogue together

1

Thinker

Instruction

Mastery-based online lessons in argument mapping. Students learn to find the claim, lay out the reasons, supply missing premises, and test the inference.

2

Sway

The lab

One-on-one chats with a classmate who disagrees, facilitated in real time by an AI guide. Students apply the skills on live, contested questions.

3

CRIT

Measurement

The Critical Reasoning and Inference Test, given before and after, tells us whether the combination works better than either tool alone.

4

Recorded conversations

Evaluating transfer

Pre- and post-intervention audio recordings allow us to assess the extent to which the skills transfer to live conversations.

125

campuses, all sectors of higher education

375

Faculty Fellows trained in three summer workshops

70,000+

students in treatment courses over three years

4

study arms: control, Sway only, Thinker only, Thinker + Sway

STUDY GROUPS

GROUP A

Control

(No intervention)

GROUP B

Sway Only

(Dialogue practice)

GROUP C

Thinker Only

(Reasoning instruction)

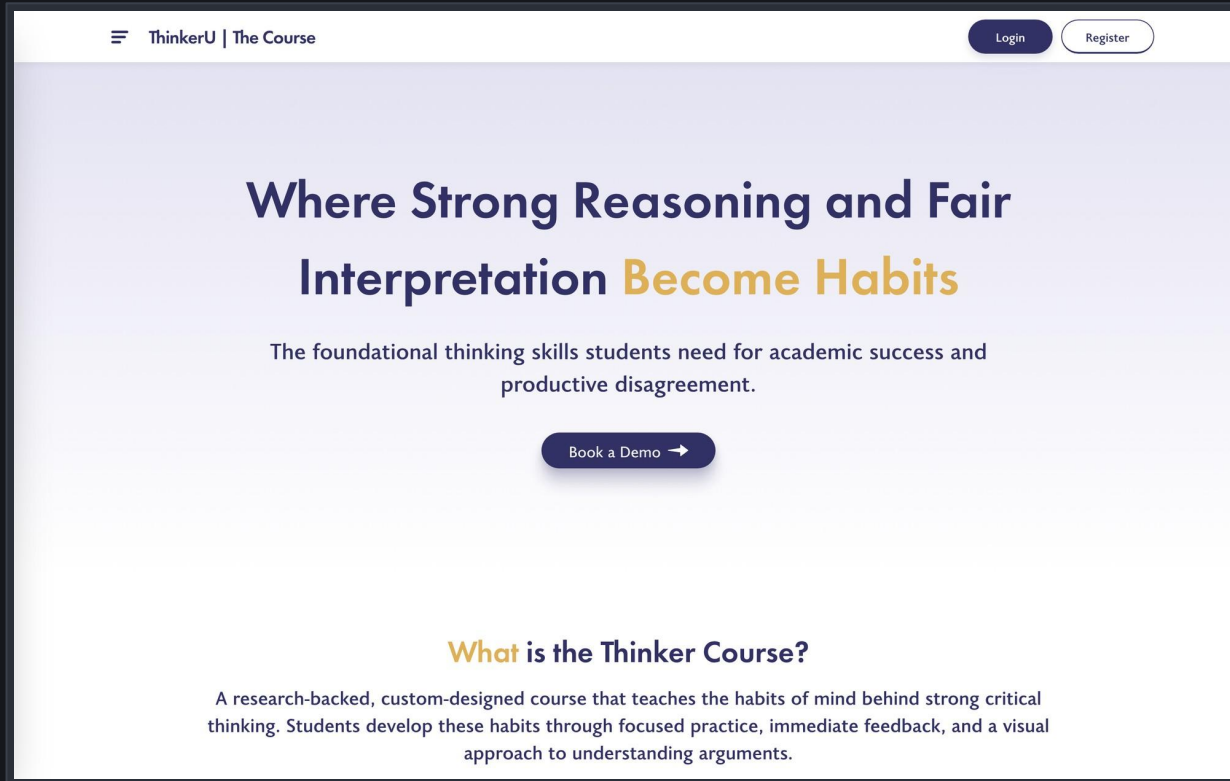
GROUP D

TA + Sway

(Integrated approach)

A quasi-randomized, three-year longitudinal study. Students take CRIT at entry, end of term, and graduation.

Thinker: mastery practice in argument mapping



ThinkerU | The Course

Login Register

Where Strong Reasoning and Fair Interpretation **Become Habits**

The foundational thinking skills students need for academic success and productive disagreement.

Book a Demo →

What is the Thinker Course?

A research-backed, custom-designed course that teaches the habits of mind behind strong critical thinking. Students develop these habits through focused practice, immediate feedback, and a visual approach to understanding arguments.

learn.thinkeru.org



WHAT STUDENTS DO

- A free online course from ThinkerU, a nonprofit that grew out of the Harvard Philosophy Department
- A short diagnostic, then eight lessons of mastery-based practice with immediate feedback, about one lesson per week
- Students learn to identify claims and reasons, distinguish premises from conclusions, map argument structure, supply missing co-premises, and reconstruct an opponent's view charitably
- Short videos followed by quizzes; students repeat until they demonstrate mastery

IN YOUR COURSE

- Runs alongside existing readings; assign a lesson a week and debrief briefly in class
- Instructor dashboard shows each student's progress
- Used at 70+ colleges with 40,000+ users; 93% faculty retention; free to ICDC Fellows and their students
- Integrates with standard LMS platforms

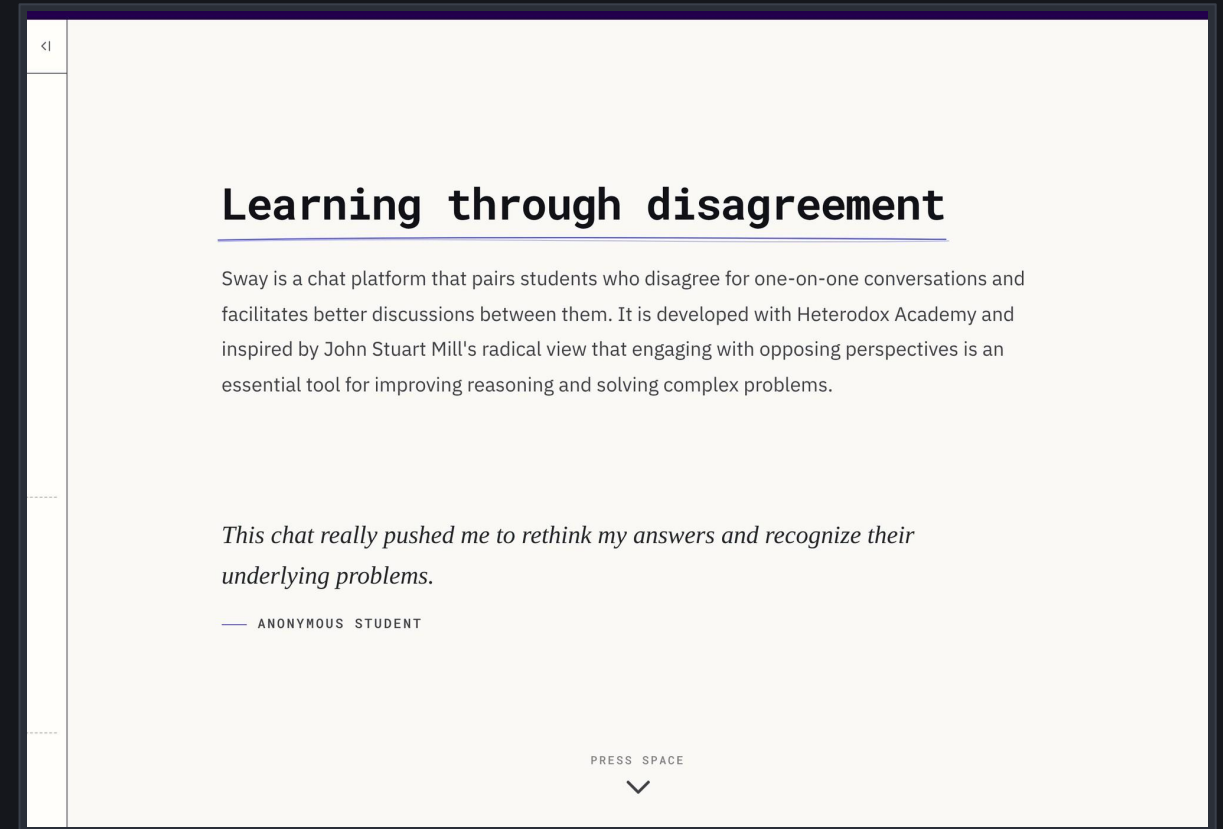
Sway: guided conversations across disagreement

HOW IT WORKS

- Students state an opinion on a contested question; Sway pairs each with a classmate who disagrees
- The two talk in a chat. Guide, an AI facilitator, joins every conversation to pose questions, surface assumptions, and de-escalate without taking sides
- Opinions are measured before and after each chat, so instructors get behavioral evidence of belief updating, not only self-report
- Instructors receive an AI-written report of the class's conversations with no student named

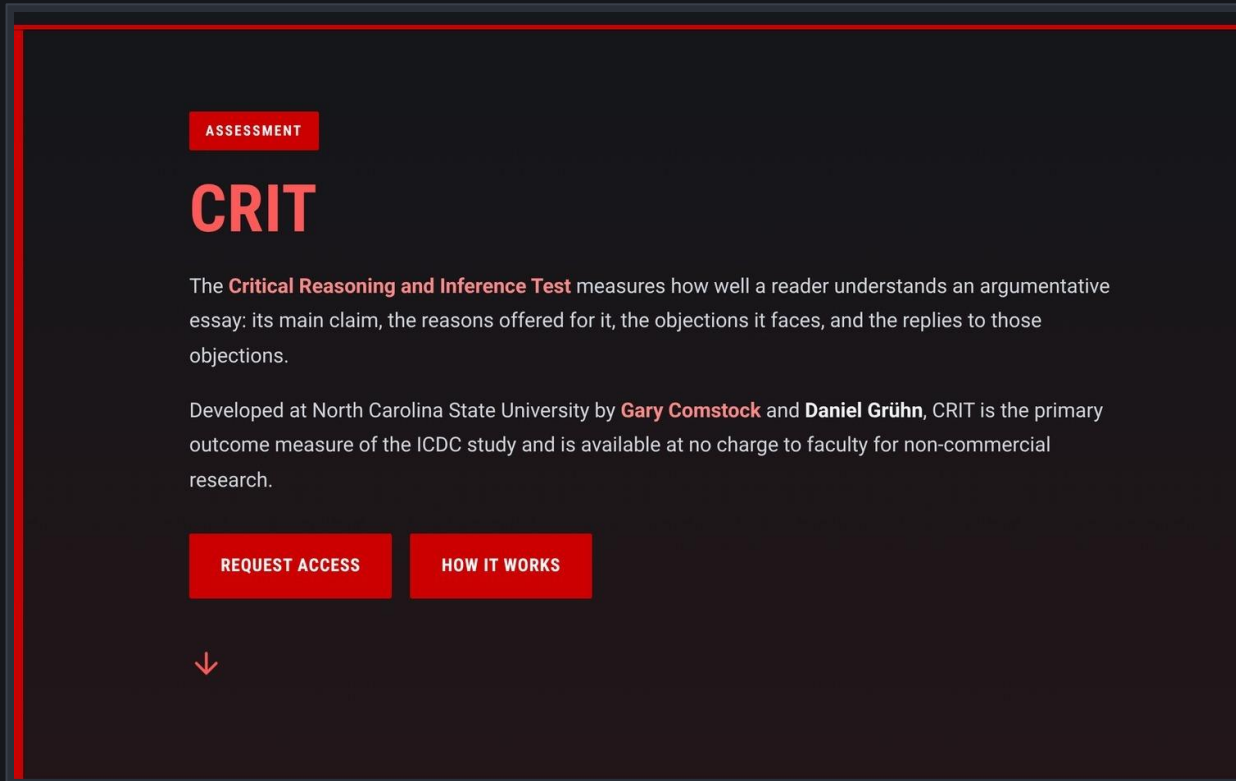
TRACK RECORD

- Developed by Disagree Wisely with Heterodox Academy; winner of the 2025 Tools Competition (Post-Secondary)
- Used by 179 professors at 120+ institutions, from Ivy League universities to community colleges



swaybeta.ai

CRIT: can students follow a real argument?

A screenshot of the CRIT website. At the top, there is a red button labeled 'ASSESSMENT'. Below it, the title 'CRIT' is displayed in large, bold, red letters. Underneath the title, a paragraph explains that the 'Critical Reasoning and Inference Test' measures a reader's understanding of an argumentative essay. Below this paragraph, another paragraph states that CRIT was developed at North Carolina State University by Gary Comstock and Daniel Grünh. At the bottom of the main content area, there are two red buttons: 'REQUEST ACCESS' and 'HOW IT WORKS'. A red arrow points downwards below these buttons.

ASSESSMENT

CRIT

The **Critical Reasoning and Inference Test** measures how well a reader understands an argumentative essay: its main claim, the reasons offered for it, the objections it faces, and the replies to those objections.

Developed at North Carolina State University by **Gary Comstock** and **Daniel Grünh**, CRIT is the primary outcome measure of the ICDC study and is available at no charge to faculty for non-commercial research.

REQUEST ACCESS **HOW IT WORKS**

↓

icdcusa.com/crit

One essay

About 1,200 words on a contested question, the kind of text students meet in a newspaper or policy debate

Fifteen items

Multiple-choice questions about the argument itself: the claim, its support, the objections, the replies

Four skills

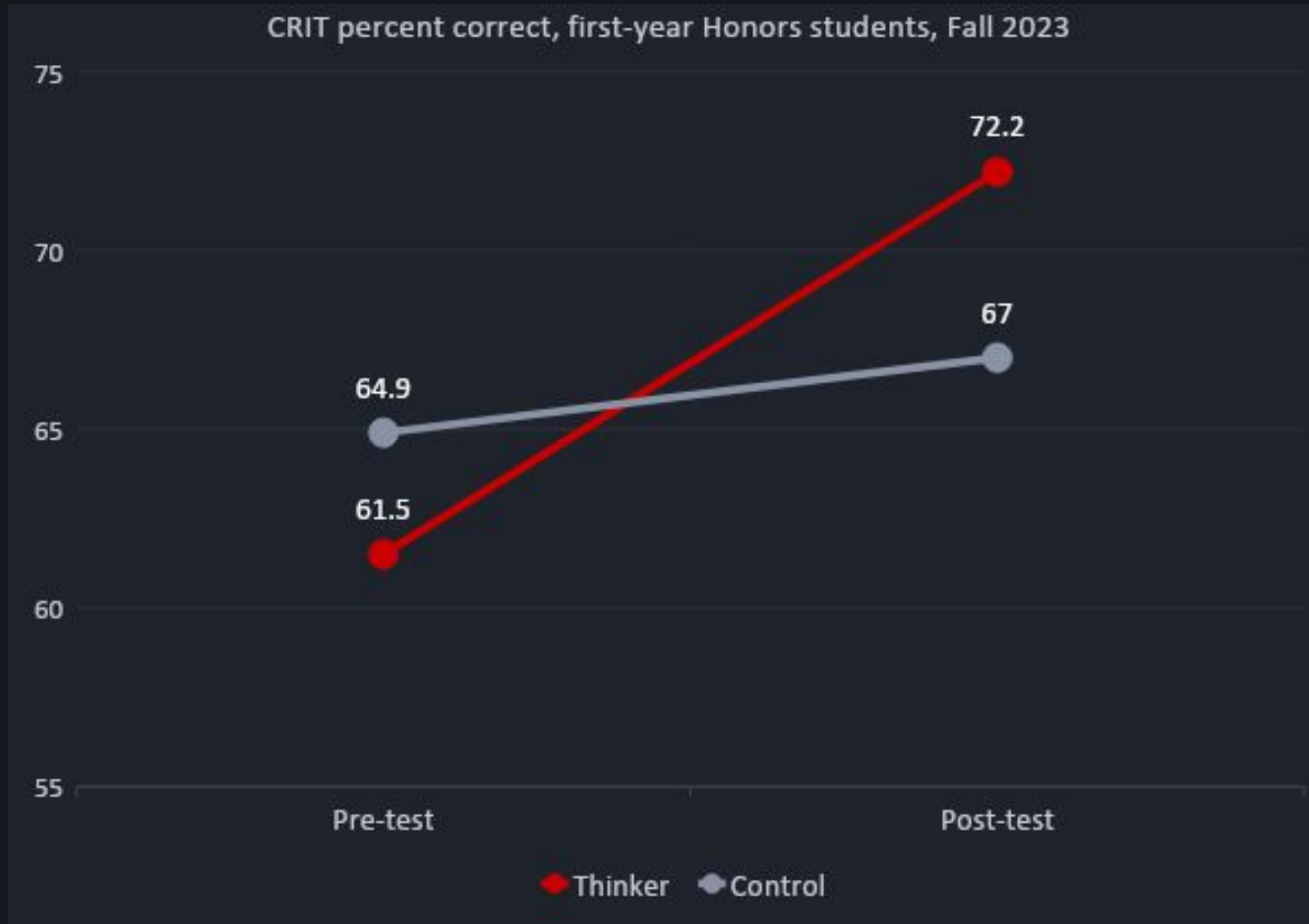
Identify the main claim, more than one reason, the objections considered, and the rebuttals offered

Parallel forms

Different essays, same design, so pre- and post-tests measure the skill rather than memory of an essay

Developed at NC State by Gary Comstock and Daniel Grünh. Validated in *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* (2026). Free to faculty for non-commercial research.

NC State trial: Thinker added 8.6 points over control



+10.7

points, Thinker group (n = 306)

+2.1

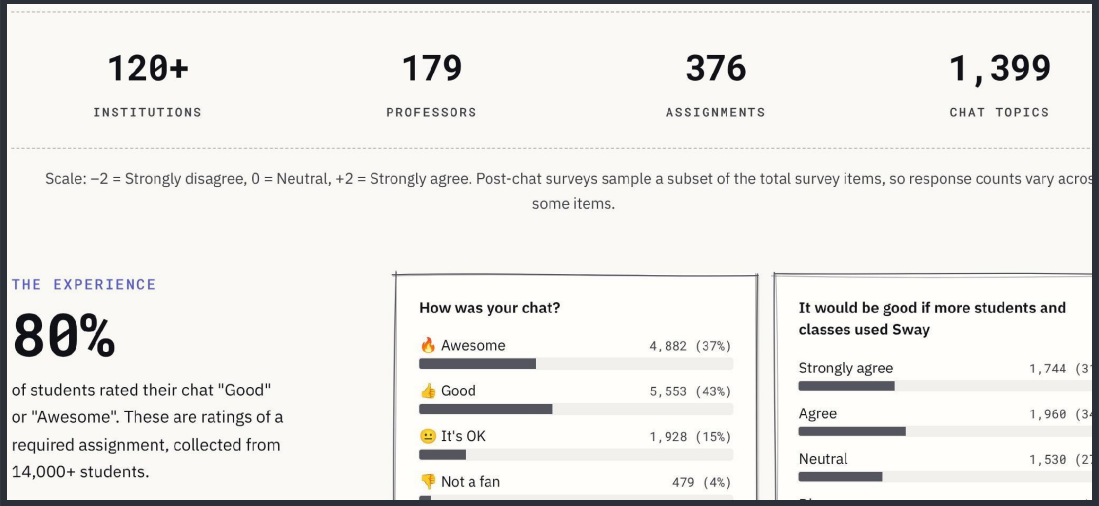
points, control group (n = 305)

THE STUDY

- All entering NC State Honors students were quasi-randomly assigned to complete Thinker or not
- CRIT given at the start and end of the fall term; the difference in gains is significant: $F(1,609) = 45.4$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .07$, a medium effect
- The gain held in the spring, and students who also took a face-to-face critical thinking seminar gained 16 points over the year

Source: Comstock, Cassidy, Johnson and Grünh, NC State Honors Program trial; unpublished preliminary data.

What students say after a Sway conversation



Post-chat surveys from 120+ colleges and universities, 376 assignments, 1,399 chat topics. Scale items report Agree plus Strongly agree.

Source: swaybeta.ai/survey, accessed October 2026.



Call for applications: ICDC Faculty Fellows



Nov 1, 2026

Applications open

Feb 1, 2027

Applications close

Mar 1, 2027

Decisions announced

June 14 to 17, 2027

Workshop at UNC-Chapel Hill (SCiLL)

WHAT FELLOWS DO

- Attend the week-long workshop, with a \$2,500 out of state or \$1,000 in-state travel expense stipend
- Integrate the ICDCM curriculum into courses across three academic years, fall 2027 to fall 2029
- Give CRIT at the start and end of each term; coauthor publications on the results
- Apply with letters of support from your department chair and dean
- Preference given to pairs of philosophically-trained faculty from each campus
- Preference given to candidates whose institutions provide matching stipends
- Current and past clients of Thinker not eligible.

WHAT ICDC PROVIDES

- Thinker and Sway free to Fellows and their students; both integrate with standard LMS platforms
- IRB: ICDC provides assistance and templates for completing Review Board paperwork at the Fellow's institution.
- No extra staff time or facilitator training beyond the workshop
- A national community of Fellows and weekly office hours on Zoom: Tuesdays 11:00 to 11:30 am ET, Wednesdays 4:00 to 4:30 pm ET

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education (FIPSE). Partners: NC State, Notre Dame, Harvard, Texas, Camden County College, Edward Waters University, SCiLL at UNC-Chapel Hill, Thinker, Disagree Wisely, Heterodox Academy.

Apply at icdcusa.com