

Understanding Epistemological Development in Freshmen College Students:
A Longitudinal Investigation of Students in Freshmen Experience Courses

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Abstract

Although some students in freshmen experience courses demonstrate broad improvements in critical thinking, such improvements may be limited to some forms of higher-order thinking but not others. To test this hypothesis, we assessed a range of epistemological beliefs in 158 students enrolled in a required freshmen experience class at a large university during the first and last weeks of the semester. They completed assessments that tapped their need for closure, belief defensiveness, and need for cognition. Our hypothesis was supported; while students became less defensive over time—in terms of defending their beliefs based on personal hunches—they remained fixated in terms of their need for closure and cognition. In order to achieve the latter abilities, one first must “loosen” rigid epistemological beliefs, such as belief defensiveness.