

Socratic Dialogue

The following information is condensed from the works of Richard Paul, Professor at Sonoma State College in California. For several years, his efforts have resulted in very precise and unique approaches to develop critical thinking skills in reading and writing. He published numerous articles on the subject and developed 4 handbooks for critical thinking skills, grades K-3, 4-6, 6-9, and 9-12. The following information is from his writings.

Socratic Questioning:

- ❖ raises basic issues
- ❖ probes beneath the surface of things
- ❖ pursues problematic areas of thought
- ❖ helps students to discover the structure of their own thought
- ❖ helps students develop sensitivity to clarity, accuracy, and relevance
- ❖ helps students arrive at judgment through their own reasoning
- ❖ helps students note claims, evidence, conclusions, questions-at-issue, assumptions, implications, consequences, concepts, interpretations, points of view, the elements of thought

There are 3 kinds of Socratic discussion; spontaneous or unplanned; exploratory, issue-specific. For the purposes of planning and practicing the art of dialog and questioning, this document deals with issue-specific dialog.

To Participate Effectively in Socratic Questioning One Must:

- ❖ listen carefully to what others say
- ❖ take what they say seriously
- ❖ look for reasons and evidence
- ❖ recognize and reflect upon assumptions
- ❖ discover implications and consequences
- ❖ seek examples, analogies, and objections
- ❖ seek to distinguish what one knows from what one merely believes
- ❖ seek to enter empathetically into the perspectives or points of view of others
- ❖ be on the alert for inconsistencies, vagueness, and other possible problems in thought
- ❖ look beneath the surface of things and maintain a healthy sense of skepticism
- ❖ be willing to helpfully play the role of devils advocate

Strategy Lists: 35 Dimensions of Critical Thought

Following strategies were designed to provide thinking skills in routine lessons, providing both a written and oral process for practicing the application of thinking beyond basic data.

A. Affective Strategies

1. thinking independently
2. developing insight into egocentricity or sociocentricity
3. exercising fair mindedness
4. exploring thoughts underlying feelings and feelings underlying thoughts
5. developing intellectual humility and suspending judgment
6. developing intellectual courage
7. developing intellectual good faith or integrity
8. developing intellectual perseverance
9. developing confidence in reason

B. Cognitive Strategies – Macro-Abilities

10. refining generalizations and avoiding oversimplifications
11. comparing analogous situations: transferring insights to new contexts.
12. developing one's perspective: creating or exploring beliefs, arguments, or theories
13. clarifying issues, conclusions, or beliefs
14. clarifying and analyzing the meanings of words or phrases
15. developing criteria for evaluation: clarifying values and standards
16. evaluating the credibility of sources of information
17. questioning deeply: raising and pursuing root or significant questions
18. analyzing or evaluating arguments, interpretations, beliefs, or theories
19. generating or assessing solutions
20. analyzing or evaluating practices or policies
21. reading critically: clarifying or critiquing texts
22. listening critically: the art of silent dialogue
23. making interdisciplinary connections
24. practicing Socratic discussion: clarifying and questioning beliefs, theories, or perspectives

25. reasoning dialogically: comparing perspectives, interpretations, or theories
26. reasoning dialectically: evaluating perspectives, interpretations, or theories

C. Cognitive Strategies – Micro-Skills

27. comparing and contrasting ideals with actual practice
28. thinking precisely about thinking: using critical vocabulary
29. noting significant similarities and differences
30. examining or evaluating assumptions
31. distinguishing relevant from irrelevant facts
32. making plausible inferences, predictions, or interpretations
33. evaluating evidence and alleged facts
34. recognizing contradictions
35. exploring implications and consequences

Students must learn the fundamentals which is micro-skills in order to move onto the bigger picture which is macro-abilities.

Students need to learn procedures for gathering facts, and they doubtless need to have opportunities to express their preferences, but the most important need is to develop their capacities for reasoned judgment. They need to know how to come to conclusions of their own based on evidence (facts) and reasoning of their own within the framework of their own perspectives.

The 35 strategies were primarily developed as a guide to remodel lesson plans and assignments. However, they also provide taxonomy for oral questioning to clarify and probe. Teachers should implement one strategy, then another, and still another, until more options are available when asking questions.

Many questions in the Socratic format have also been used in previous samples in this guide. Most questions in this section may also be used for critical thinking by limiting the number of probing questions.

Questions of Clarification

- What do you mean by _____?
- What is your main point?

- How does _____ relate to _____?
- Could you put that another way?
- What do you think is the main issue here?
- Is your basic point _____ or _____?
- Let me see if I understand you; do you mean _____ or _____?
- How does this relate to our discussion/ problem/ issue?
- What do you think John meant by his remark? What did you take John to mean?
- Jane, would you summarize in your own words what Richard has said? Richard, is that what you meant?
- Could you give me an example?
- Would this be an example: _____?
- Could you explain that further?
- Would you say more about that?
- Why do you say that?

Questions that Probe Assumptions

- What are you assuming?
- What is Karen assuming?
- What could we assume instead?
- You seem to be assuming _____. Do I understand you correctly?
- All of your reasoning is dependent on the idea that _____. Why have you based your reasoning on _____ rather than _____?
- You seem to be assuming _____. How would you justify taking this for granted?
- Is it always the case? Why do you think the assumption holds here?

Questions that Probe Reasons and Evidence

- What would be an example?
- What are your reasons for saying that?
- What other information do we need to know?
- Could you explain your reasons to us?
- But is that good evidence to believe that?
- Are those reasons adequate?
- Is there reason to doubt that evidence?
- Who is in a position to know if that is the case?
- What would you say to someone who said _____?
- Can someone else give evidence to support that response?
- By what reasoning did you come to that conclusion?
- How could we go about finding out whether that is true?
- How do you know?
- Why did you say that?
- Why do you think that is true?
- What led you to that belief?
- Do you have any evidence for that?
- How does that apply to this case?

- What difference does that make?
- What would convince you otherwise?

Questions about Viewpoints or Perspectives

- You seem to be approaching this issue from ____perspective. Why have you chosen this rather than that perspective?
- How would other groups/types of people respond? Why? What would influence them?
- How could you answer the objection that _____ would make?
- Can/did anyone see this another way?
- What would someone who disagrees say?
- What is an alternative?
- How are Ken's and Rosanne's ideas alike? Different?

Questions that Probe Implications and Consequences

- What are you implying by that?
- When you say _____, are you implying _____?
- But if that happened, what else would also happen as a result? Why?
- What effect would that have?
- Would that necessarily happen or only probably happen?
- What is an alternative?
- If this and this are the case, then what else must also be true?

Questions about the Question

- How can we find out?
- How could someone settle this question?
- Is the question clear? Do we understand it?
- Is this question easy or hard to answer? Why?
- Would _____ put the question differently?
- Does this question ask us to evaluate something?
- Do we all agree that this is the question?
- To answer this question, what questions would we have to answer first?
- I'm not sure I understand how you are interpreting the main question at issue.
- Is this the same issue as _____?
- Can we break this question down at all?
- How would _____ put the issue?
- What does this question assume?
- Why is this question important?

Socratic Dialog

Processes to be followed using different descriptors.

Clarity: Could you elaborate further? Could you give me an example? Could you illustrate what you mean?

Accuracy: How could we check on that? How could we find out if that is true? How could we verify or test that?

Precision: Could you be more specific? Could you give me more details? Could you be more exact?

Relevance: How does that relate to the problem? How does that bear on the question? How does that help us with the issue?

Depth: What factors make this a difficult problem? What are some of the complexities of this issue? What are some of the difficulties we need to deal with?

Breadth: Do we need to look at this from another perspective? Do we need to consider another point of view? Do we need to look at this in other ways?

Logic: Does all this make sense together? Does your first paragraph fit in with the last? Does what you say follow from the evidence?

Significance: Is this the most important problem to consider? Is this the central idea to focus on? Which of these facts are most important?

Fairness: Do I have any vested interest in this issue? Am I sympathetically representing the viewpoints of everyone?

Socratic Question Check List for Personal Evaluation

1. Did I respond to all answers with a further question?

Keeping Participants focused on the Elements of Thoughts

1. Did my questions make the goal of the discussion clear?
2. Did I pursue relevant information?
3. Did I question inferences, interpretations, and conclusions where appropriate or significant?
4. Did I focus on key ideas or concepts?
5. Did I note questionable assumptions?
6. Did I question implications and consequences?
7. Did I call attention to the point of view inherent in various answers?
8. Did I keep the central question in focus?

9. Did I call for a clarification of context, when necessary?

Keeping Participants on Systems For Thought

1. Did I distinguish subjective questions from factual questions, from those requiring reasoned judgment within conflicting viewpoints?
2. Did I keep the participants aware of alternative ways to think about the problem?

Keeping Participants Focused on Standards For Thought

1. Did I question for clarification, when necessary?
2. Did I question for more details or greater precision, when necessary?
3. Did I keep participants sensitive to the need to check facts and verify the accuracy of information?
4. Did I keep participants aware of the need to stick to the question on the floor; to make sure their "answers" were relevant to the question being addressed at any given point?
5. Did I keep participants aware of the complexities in the question on the floor? Did I ask participants to think deeply about deep issues?

Critical Thinking Skills, by Richard Paul, grades k-3, 4-6, 6-9, high school; Sonoma State University.