

Critical Thinking through Socratic Questioning

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is defined as the process we use to reflect on, access and judge the assumptions underlying our own and others ideas and actions. This includes: “the thinker’s dispositions and orientations; a range of specific analytical, evaluative, and problem-solving skills; contextual influences; use of multiple perspectives; awareness of one’s own assumptions; capacities for metacognition; or a specific set of thinking processes or tasks” (Stassen, et al, 2011).

Socratic Questioning

Socratic questioning is learning-centered approach that challenges a person to develop their critical thinking skills and engage in analytic discussion which leads to independent learning and thinking. This form of questioning can be used to explore ideas, to get to the root of things, to uncover assumptions, and to analyze complex concepts. This type of questioning usually focuses on fundamental concepts, principles, theories, issues or problems.

Socratic questioning is at the heart of critical thinking and the following questions can be used by tutors to help draw information from their tutees. These are adapted from R.W. Paul's six types of Socratic questions:

1. Questions for clarification:	Why do you say that? What do you mean by...? How does this relate to our discussion?
2. Questions that probe assumptions:	What could we assume instead? How can you verify or disapprove that assumption? On what basis do we think this way?
3. Questions that probe reasons and evidence:	What would be an example? What is....analogous to? What do you think causes to happen...? Why?
4. Questions about Viewpoints and Perspectives:	What would be an alternative? What is another way to look at it? Why is the best? What are the strengths and weaknesses of...? How are...and ...similar? What is a counterargument for...?
5. Questions that probe implications and consequences:	What generalizations can you make? What are the consequences of that assumption? What are you implying? How does...affect...? How does...tie in with what we learned before?
6. Questions about the question:	What was the point of this question? Why do you ask this question? What does...mean? How does...apply to everyday life?

(Adapted from: <http://www.umich.edu/~elements/prob.solv/strategy/cthinking.htm>)

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You can use Socratic questioning to:

1. probe your thinking which helps you begin to distinguish what you know or understand from what you do not know or understand.
2. foster your abilities to ask Socratic questions for yourself and others, so that you can use these tools to critically question situations. The more you practise them the more you will further your learning.

This tool focuses on open-ended questions with the goal of bringing a person to realize an answer for themselves. It avoids giving an answer without giving any tools for solving the next questions. As you ask questions, if you are not finding the answer, ask a different question or ask your question in a different way.

Socratic Questioning Activity:

Frame and then answer a series of questions from your subject area, using Socratic questioning.

Clarity

Assumptions

Evidence

Perspectives

Implications

Questions about Questions

Paul, R. and Elder, L. (2006). *The Art of Socratic Questioning*. Dillon Beach, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking.

Stassen, M.L.A., Herrington, A., Henderson, L. (2011) Defining critical thinking in higher education. In *To Improve the Academy*, Vol 30. Professional and Organizational Development Network.