

Critical Thinking Activities: Discussion

Believing and Doubting (Barkley, 2010)

Using a controversial topic from your course's discipline, provide students with a reading that presents a persuasive, singular viewpoint about the topic (note: this might also be possible with a video argument). Without giving away the later "doubting" portion of this activity, ask students to read the text empathetically, trying to sincerely identify with the author's views. Have them make a list of all of the points the author makes with which they agree. (The preceding can be done outside of class.) In class, have students discuss their points of agreement in groups of 4-5, then follow up with a whole-class discussion, listing points on the board. Then ask students to re-read the text from a doubting perspective. Have them list which points they suspect may not be true or genuine. Discuss again in groups as before; be sure students discuss reasons they suspect certain points to not be trustworthy. Again, put these points on the board. Conclude with a class discussion of why it's important to resist being passive consumers of arguments and instead become critical thinkers/readers/listeners.

Alternatives:

- Could possibly be done as a short series of homework assignments, with whole-class discussions following each assignment, or instead with a reflective essay on what they have learned.
- You may also wish to conclude the entire activity by asking students to generate a list of steps to critical reading, such as:
 - Try to determine who the author is and their purpose for writing the text;
 - Determine the target audience as a way to deduce the author's motivations;
 - Look for illogical arguments, especially those that have no relevance to the subject.
- Instead of using a text, present the pro and con sides in 2 mini-lectures.

Example:

Read the following text on the use of human embryonic stem cells. (Provide an article that convincingly details how the creation, usage, and destruction of human embryonic stem cells is the first step toward reproductive cloning and how it fundamentally devalues the worth of a human being). Read the article empathetically, that is, as though you are on the same side the author is taking. When you are done reading, list all the points the author makes that you agree with. (Allow time for this to be done and for groups to discuss results. Next, give a brief lecture on the benefits of stem cell research.) Now, take a "doubting" perspective – that is, read the article again with skepticism. When you are done, list any points that you are suspicious of or have reason to doubt, as well as any other flaws in the argument you might notice. (Again allow time for individual and group portions to be completed. Discuss as a whole class).

Split-Room Debate (Barkley, 2010)

Find a good, controversial topic in your course that can have two identifiably opposing sides. Craft a provocative single-sentence thesis regarding the issue (do not yet share this with students). Prior to the class debate, either provide students with background information through lecture, or assign relevant readings (for a more advanced option, have students conduct their own research regarding the topic). Before the debate begins, set and explain ground rules, such as specifying that a student can present only one argument at a time, or each statement is limited to 2-3 minutes. Next, point out a dividing line in the classroom (that roughly splits the room in half) and tell the students which side of the room is for the "pro" and the "con" side of the debate issue. Then present your crafted thesis statement, give students a few minutes to consider it, after which they are to move to the side of the room that represents the side of the debate they most support. Begin with a student on the "pro" side, who presents his/her argument, and then selects a student from the opposing side when finished. When new

arguments have run out, ask students to resume their original seats, and then hold a whole-class discussion to summarize important issues regarding the topic. Encourage students to also discuss to what extent, if any, their opinions changed.

Alternatives: Instead of conducting a whole-class debate, form smaller groups of 2-4 in which students exchange opposing arguments. The activity (small-group or whole-class) can be followed up with an assignment where students are required to write a paper describing issues that they clarified or confirmed, any surprises they encountered as a result of the debate, new information learned, and whether their opinions changed or not. For an online version of the debate, you can require students to alternate supporting and opposing postings; also consider requiring them to cite the information that supports their arguments.

Example Thesis Statements:

Debate the following thesis/statement:

- *Public schools should be allowed to teach creationism alongside evolution as part of their science curriculum.*
- *Scientists are justified in performing experiments on animals to develop products and medicines that benefit human beings.*

Question Generation (Bean, 2001)

Students are provided with examples that demonstrate the art of questioning in your particular discipline. Either as a whole class or beginning in smaller groups, have students brainstorm possible questions related to a topic you provide. Following the brainstorming, the group or class then selects what they believe to be the 3 best questions to ask. This task focuses students' attention on analysis of a topic, directions to search for evidence, and other relationships to consider (which may relate to implications).

Alternatives: Although doing this orally with a group is best for brainstorming sessions, this could be assigned for individual work. It can also be done online either as an individual assignment, small-group discussion work, or whole-class discussion.

Examples:

Carefully observe/read this [poem, graph, statistical output, painting, etc.]. What aspects of it puzzle or intrigue you? As a group, pose three good questions that emerge from your observation and analysis of this item.

We have been discussing the debatable topic of using palliative medication during childbirth. Scientists often pose research questions that are especially relevant to a topic, such as "What is the effect of X on Y?" or, more generically, "Does X impact Y?" Using these types of questions as a starting point, generate three excellent questions related to medication use during childbirth.

- *Optional Follow-Up (Barton, 2010): As a class, have students agree upon the top 3 questions. Then ask, "Where can we find these answers?" Have students seek evidence that answers the questions posed, bring it back to class, and consider this evidence as the topic is further explored.*