

Week 7

Standards for Thinking

The minimal ones:

clarity/relevance/logic/accuracy/depth/significance/precision/breadth/fairness

Clarity

Questions that focus on clarity include:

- Could you elaborate on that point?
- Could you express that point in another way?
- Could you give me an illustration?
- Could you give me an example?
- Let me state in my own words what I think you just said. Tell me if I am clear about your meaning.

Which one is clearer? Why? (“What can be done about the education system in Taiwan?” ↔ “What can educators do to ensure that students learn the skills and abilities that help them function successfully on the job and in their daily decision making?”)

Practice

“She is a good person.” Is this statement clear?

“He is a jerk.” Unclear?

Accuracy

Questions focusing on making thinking more accurate include:

- Is that really true?
- How could we check to see whether that is accurate?
- How could we find out whether that is true?

People tend to make two kinds of inaccurate statements: false positives about the people they personally like, and false negatives about the people they personally dislike. See whether you can think of an example of an inaccurate statement from your recent experience.

Practice

Can you identify a statement you heard recently that was clear but inaccurate?

People tend to make two kinds of inaccurate statements: false positives about the people they personally like and false negatives about the people they personally

dislike. Politically motivated statements tend to follow a similar pattern.

Precision

Questions focusing on making thinking more precise include:

- Could you give me more detail?
- Could you be more specific?

“Jack is overweight.”

But

“Is there any milk in the refrigerator?” “Yes.” Is the answer precise enough?

Imagine that you are ill and go to the doctor. He wouldn’t say, “Take 1.4876946 antibiotic pills twice per day.” Why?

Practice

Can you think of a recent situation in which you needed more details to figure out something and, because you didn’t have the details, you experienced some negative consequences?

Relevance

Questions focusing on relevance include:

- How is this idea connected to the question?
- How does that bear on the issue?
- How does this idea relate to this other idea?
- How does your question relate to the issue we are dealing with?

Practice:

Can you identify a statement you heard recently that was clear, accurate, and sufficiently precise but irrelevant to the circumstance, problem, or issue?

Identify, first circumstances in which people tend to introduce irrelevant considerations into a discussion (for example, in meetings, in response to questions in class, in everyday dialogues when they have a hidden agenda or simply want to take control of the conversation for some reason). Write out your answer.

Depth

- How does your answer address the complexities in the question?
- How are you taking into account the problems in the question?
- How are you dealing with the most significant factors in the problem?

Let’s say you are asked what should be done about the problem of drug use in

Taiwan, and you answer by saying, “Just say no.” This answer is clear, accurate, precise, and relevant. Nevertheless, it lacks depth. Why?

Practice:

Identify a newspaper article containing a statement that is clear, accurate, precise, and relevant but superficial with respect to a complex issue. For example, a number of laws take a Band-Aid approach to systemic problems such as drugs and crime. (1. State the problem. 2. State how the article deals with the problem and why the approach taken is superficial. 3. Focus on the complexity of the issue, and state how the problem might be dealt with.)

Breadth

Questions focusing on making thinking broader include:

Do we need to consider another point of view?

Is there another way to look at this question?

What would this look like from a conservative standpoint?

What would this look like from the point of . . . ?

Why are humans frequently guilty of narrow-mindedness?

Let’s say, for example, that you and I live together and that I like to play loud music, which annoy you. What do I do so that I don’t have to change my self-serving behavior?

Practice

Consider the question: Is abortion morally justified? Try to state and elaborate on each of these points of view in detail, regardless of your personal view.

Logic

Questions that focus on making thinking more logical include:

- Do all of this fit together logically?
- Does this really make sense?
- Does that follow from what you said?
- How does that follow from the evidence?
- Before, you implied this, and now you are saying that. I don’t see how both can be true.

When we think, we bring together a variety of thoughts in some order. When the combined thoughts are mutually supporting and make sense in combination, the

thinking is logical.

A person has had a heart attack, and her doctors have told her she must be careful about what she eats to avoid problems in the future. Yet she concludes that what she eats really doesn't matter. Why is her conclusion illogical?

Practice:

Identify a newspaper/web article that contains an example of illogical thinking—thinking that doesn't make sense to you. (1. State the issue the thinking revolves around. 2. State the thinking you believe is illogical and why you think it is illogical. 3. State some implications of the illogical thinking. What are some consequences likely to follow from the illogical thinking.

Significance

Questions that focus on making thinking more significant include:

- What is the most significant information we need to address this issue?
- How is that fact important in context?
- Which of these questions is the most significant?
- Which of these ideas or concepts is the most important?

In college, few students focus on important questions such as, *What does it mean to be an educated person? What do I need to do to become educated?* Instead, students tend to ask questions such as, *What do I need to do to get an A in this course? How many pages does this paper have to be? What do I have to do to satisfy this professor? What's wrong here?*

Practice

Think about your life, about the way you spend your time, in terms of the amount of time you spend on significant versus trivial things. As you do, write the answers to these questions:

1. What is the most important goal or purpose you should focus on at this point in your life? Why is this purpose important? How much time do you spend focused on it?
2. What are the most trivial or superficial things you spend time focused on (things such as your appearance, impressing your friends, chatting about insignificant things at gatherings, and the like?)
3. What can you do to reduce the amount of time you spend on the trivial and increase the amount of time you spend on the significant?

Fairness

Questions that focus on ensuring that thinking is fair include:

- Is my thinking justified given the evidence?
- Am I taking into account the weight of the evidence that others might advance in the situation?
- Are these assumptions justified?
- Is my purpose fair given the implications of my behavior?
- Is the manner in which I am addressing the problem fair—or is my vested interest keeping me from considering the problem from alternative viewpoints?
- Am I using concepts justifiably, or am I using them unfairly to manipulate someone (to selfishly get what I want)?

An instance:

John is interested in borrowing Jay's portable stereo for a trip. John, therefore, begins to hang out regularly with Jay. When they are with others, John introduced Jay as his "friend," and Jay comes to define John as his friend. So when John asks to borrow Jay's stereo, Jay readily agrees (because John is his friend). However, when John fails to return the stereo, and Jay asks for it back, John lies and says he lost it. The fact is that John never intended to return the stereo—and never considered Jay a friend.

What's the problem here?

We often make broad, sweeping generalizations such as:

Elderly people aren't interested in sex.

Young men are interested only in sex.

Pilots are cool.

Beauties are dumb.

Cheerleaders are airheads.

Intellectuals are nerds.

Learning is boring.

School has nothing to do with life.

What's wrong with the assumptions?

You see a woman in a wheelchair.

While in a restaurant, your friend ordered a steak cooked very rare.

Your significant other does not call you when he promised.

Practice

Write down a debate/discussion between you and several other people (friends or

family) on an important controversial issue (for example, “What is the best solution to the low birth rate in Taiwan?”). Comment on which of the standards are being met and which are violated at each “step” along the way. Notice now seldom people tend to use intellectual standards in their thinking, how unclear everyday thinking often is, and how people may feel just as confident in their positions even after you point out violations of intellectual standards. What does that tell you about them?

Bring intellectual standards to bear on your purpose

Purpose/ Question at issue/ Information/ Interpretation and inference/ Concepts/ Assumptions/ Implications and consequences/ Point of view

Purpose:

What’s your purpose in being in college? Have you become so involved in the social life at college that you lose sight of your purpose and thus fail to achieve it?

Do you have contradictory purpose?

Practice for “purpose”

Think of an important problem in your life. This can be a problem in a personal relationship, at your place of work in college, or in another situation. Now state your purpose in the situation clearly and precisely. What exactly are you trying to accomplish? Is your purpose fair or justifiable? Is it realistic?

Question at issue or Problem to be solved

An important part of being able to think well is assessing your ability to formulate a problem in a clear and relevant way.

As a student interested in developing your mind, what is the most fundamental question at issue? Is the question simple or complex? If it is complex, what makes it complex? Am I sticking to the question?

Practice continued

Go back to the important problem in Practice for “purpose”. Now state the problem you are addressing and then the question that emerge from that problem. State your question clearly and precisely. What complexities, if any, are inherent in the problem? Is there more than one question you need to address to reason effectively

through the problem?

Point of view

As a student in class, you might ask yourself these questions:

Am I so locked into my point of view that I am unable to see the issue from other points of view?

Must I consider multiple points of view to reason well through the issue at hand?

What is the point of view of the author?

What is the frame of reference in this discipline?

Are there worldviews implicit in these perspectives?

Practice continued

Now state the point or points of view relevant to the issue. State each point of view clearly and precisely. Make sure you are considering all relevant points of view (that you are thinking broadly), and that you are representing each point of view accurately (even if it means sympathetically expressing a view that you do not personally hold.)

Information, Data, or Experience

What is the most important information I need to reason well through this issue?

Are there alternative information sources I need to consider?

How can I check to see whether the information I am using is accurate?

Am I sure that all the information I am using is relevant to the issue?

- We all hold with passionate commitment some beliefs for which we cannot provide strong evidence. (I believe my girlfriend truly loves me, though I cannot look into her mind to see whether it's so.) Why do we choose to believe?

Concepts, Theories, Ideas

What is the most fundamental concept I need to learn in this class to help me in my life?

How does this concept connect with other key concepts in the course?"

Am I clear about the important concepts in the class?

What questions do I need to ask to get clear about the concepts the teacher is explaining?

Where did I get my definition of the concept of education, terrorism. . . ?

Have I changed the meaning of a concept to fit my own purpose?
Does the word *cunning* have negative implications that the word *clever* does not?
Am I using the concept of love appropriately? For example: Do I unknowingly act as if loving a person implies a right to treat him or her discourteously?
Am I thinking deeply enough about the concept of health care? Does it take into account the patient's rights and privileges?

Assumptions

What is taken for granted in this academic discipline (or in this discussion, or this article, or this experiment)?
Are these assumptions justifiable or should I question them?
What does the author of the textbook assume in chapter. . . ?
Are these assumptions justified, or should they be questioned?
● When someone holds ideas that strike us as being repulsive, why is it useful to ask ourselves, "How do we know that so-and-so is wrong"?

Implications or Consequences

No matter where we stop tracing implications, there always will be further implications, and the same can be said about further consequences.

What are the most significant implications of this phenomenon?
What are the implications of this political practice?
What are the implications of failing to act in this context?
If we adopt this course of action, what are the like consequences?
What are the most significant implications of our tendency to solve this social problem in this way rather than in that way?
What are the implications (social, political, economic, cultural) of Taiwan's involvement in . . . war?

Inferences

If you see a person sitting on the street corner wearing tattered clothing, a worn bedroll beside him, and a bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag in his hand, you might infer that he is May this inference be logical, or not?

(* infer only what the evidence implies.

- * Check inferences for their consistency with each other.
- * Identify assumptions that lead you to your inferences.
- * Make sure your inference logically follow from this information.)