Conversations in Socrates café: Scaffolding critical thinking via Socratic questioning and dialogues

Gina Anderson
Jody Piro

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Abstract

Calls for practices that enhance critical thinking continue to increase as educators prepare K-12 and college students for success in our global society. This article highlights an instructional framework that scaffolds critical thinking by way of Socratic questioning and dialogue by employing nine Universal Intellectual Standards (Elder & Paul, 2008). A self-assessment guideline assists students in reflecting and creating a growth plan to address the elements of student dialogue, Socratic Questioning with a variety of the Universal Intellectual Standards, the application of readings, a focus on interactions between students, and dispositions supportive of respect and problem solving. This framework has the potential to enhance the level of critical thinking across multiple content areas in K-12 and college classrooms.

Introduction

The importance of critical thinking skills as an outcome of student learning is well-documented. The development of critical thinking has been named as a strategy to enhance the understanding of global and multicultural issues (Banks, 2008; Bennett, 2011; Elder, 2004; Gay & Howard, 2000) and as a necessary skill to prepare students for college and the workforce (Lai, 2011). Most recently, the Common Core State Standards (Kyllonen, 2012) indicate critical thinking is an inter-disciplinary skill that is crucial for success in schools, and Forbes magazine lists critical thinking as number one from the ten most critical job skills in 2013 (Casserly, 2012).

The purpose of this article is to introduce an instructional framework that scaffolds critical thinking by way of Socratic questioning and dialogue by employing nine Universal Intellectual Standards (Elder & Paul, 2008). This instructional framework can also inform self-assessment of critical thinking. Using the Universal Intellectual Standards as a framework for Socratic questioning and dialogue within a Socrates Café has the potential to enhance the level of critical thinking across multiple content areas in K-12 and college classrooms.

Critical Thinking via Socratic Questioning and Dialogue

Are there ways that students may be taught to think critically? Some researchers have suggested that increased critical analysis rarely occurs without instructional scaffolding of some sort (Abrami et al., 2008; Facione, 1990; Halpern, 1998; Hew & Cheung, 2003; Landsman & Gorski, 2007; Paul, 1992) and that these frameworks will increase the probability that critical thinking will occur in classrooms (Halpern, 1998). Socratic questioning and dialogue are widely recognized as a systematic approach to facilitate critical thinking (Golding, 2011; Knezic, Wubbels, Elbers, & Hajer; 2010; Paul & Elder, 2007). Named after the Greek Philosopher Socrates, this form of inquiry is
based on discussions where points of view are questioned and new insights are gained. Principles that identify and probe assumptions, recognitions, and contexts guide a Socratic dialogue (Paul, Martin, & Adamson, 1989).

The ultimate outcome of Socratic dialogue is a constructivist-oriented inquiry process that assists students to examine their own and others’ beliefs, assumptions and reasoning. Critical thinking can be defined in many ways, but philosophers, psychologists, and educators all seem to agree that using questions within dialogue to examine formal reasoning is an essential defining characteristic (Lai, 2011; Paul, Martin, & Adamson, 1989). Specifically, questions are required to stimulate thought, define tasks, express problems, identify assumptions, and explore multiple perspectives. The quality of the questions asked parallels the quality of critical thinking (Elder & Paul, 2008) and often generates further questions in order to continue thought and analysis. “The first step in asking better questions is to identify the types of questions we are currently using, why we are asking them, and finally what techniques can we utilize to improve the questioning that occurs in our classrooms” (McComas & Abraham, 2004, p. 6). Universal Intellectual Standards offer a framework for students and teachers to identify the types of questioning that are occurring during analytic discussions. The next section addresses the Universal Intellectual Standards.

**Universal Intellectual Standards**

Paul & Elder (2009) suggest that there are three levels of thought that shape human thinking. The first level of thinking is largely unreflective and self-serving; the second level of thinking is selectively reflective and lacks critical thinking vocabulary, and the third level of thinking is explicitly reflective and routinely uses critical thinking tools in analyzing and assessing thinking (p. 7). In order to help cultivate level three thinking skills, Paul & Elder (2009; Elder & Paul, 2007; 2007b) developed the Universal Intellectual Standards that utilize questions to improve the quality of thinking.

According to Elder & Paul (2007), humans regularly distort the truth, and it is this distortion in thinking that led them to create Universal Intellectual Standards for thought. “Universal Intellectual Standards are standards which must be applied to thinking whenever one is interested in checking the quality of reasoning about a problem, issue, or situation” (Elder & Paul, 2007b, p. 1). Universal Intellectual Standards (Paul & Elder, 1996) advance a framework for this outcome. The Universal Intellectual Standards include: clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, significance, and fairness of expression. Probing questions for each standard would include:

1. Clarity: Could you elaborate further? Could you give me an example? Could you illustrate what you mean?
2. Accuracy: How could we check on that? How could we find out if that is true? How could we verify or test that?
3. Precision: Could you be more specific? Could you give me more details? Could you be more exact?
4. Relevance: How does that relate to the problem? How does that bear on the question? How does that help us with the issue?
5. Depth: What factors make this a difficult problem? What are some of the complexities of this question? What are
some of the difficulties we need to deal with?
6. 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?
7. Logic: Does all this make sense together? Does your first paragraph fit in with your last? Does what you say follow from the evidence?
8. Significance: Is this the most important problem to consider? Is this the central idea to focus on? Which of these facts are most important?
9. Fairness: Do I (you, they, etc.) have any vested interest in this issue? Am I (you, they, etc.) sympathetically representing the viewpoints of others? (Elder & Paul, 2007, p. 5)

These nine standards can be applied during discussions to enhance the quality of critical thinking. The probing questions exemplifying each of the standards help students investigate existing assumptions and viewpoints and help them develop new insights; thus, they are Socratic in nature and represent varying levels of critical analysis. Socratic questioning via Intellectual Standards may be utilized within a Socrates Café.

Socrates Café

A basic cornerstone of teaching critical thinking is the disposition of respect for one’s students. Respecting students includes recognizing the demands of an educated citizenry within a democracy to be proficient in analyzing critical issues (Siegel, 1988). Teaching students to think critically may hold promise for advancing the dialogue needed for civil discourse within a democracy. Framing Socratic questioning and Socratic dialogue through the Universal Intellectual Standards may be achieved through a forum called the Socrates Café.

In modern times, Christopher Phillips (2001) may be credited with advocating for Socrates Cafés. Phillips undertook facilitating this forum by creating discussion groups in coffee shops and libraries. According to Phillips (2001, p. 20) Socrates Café “reveals people to themselves” and “makes them see what their opinions really amount to…” and “is not so much a search for absolute truth and certainty as it is a quest for honesty” (Phillips, 2001, p. 53). Socrates Cafes invite students to engage with issues that surpass the self to connect with larger societal issues. Interacting with others by posing Socratic questions and engaging in dialogue stimulates this transcendence of the self. To develop this “salon” format for a large group discussion in classrooms, a non-formal and friendly atmosphere is needed to discuss a general, open ended question (Manthey, 2010). The following section will demonstrate a portion of a sample Socrates Café and a student self-assessment rubric for the forum.

The Socrates Café is Now Open

Group Discussion Socrates Café

In this section, a typical dialogue within a Socrates Café is demonstrated using a guiding, open-ended question typical of this type of synchronous forum. This question may used for a class in the social sciences and will model a Socrates Café. This snapshot of a portion of a Socrates Cafe demonstrates Socratic dialogue with questioning posed by both teacher and students.

Guiding Question: What is the American Dream?
Student: The possibility to better your life for yourself.

Student: Building a life for yourself and family.

Student: Opportunity sums it up.

Teacher Questions 1 and 2: Who’s opportunity? Is it more about my own opportunity?

Student: It is equal opportunity. Opportunities for everyone.

Student Questions: What do we consider equal? Does everyone have the same dream?

Student: My family is an immigrant family. My mom knew there were barriers for her but she wanted us to have equal opportunity. So for future generations.

Student: Equal opportunity to express whatever religion you want.

Student: Opportunity to have choice in areas such as religion and education.

Student: Opportunity to have a political voice.

Student: The dream changes with every generation. We all have a different opportunity of what that is.

Student Question: What about the opportunity to have opportunities?

Student Question: Are you saying the opportunity to create your own life?

Student: Yes, the opportunity to pay it forward. To give back.

Student: An example of opportunity one person would have that another would not

would be, like recently, to be Miss America, such as the Indian-American who just won.

Teacher Question 3: What makes the word opportunity so difficult and complex?

Student: Everyone has a different viewpoint of what an opportunity is. Such as some people didn’t feel that Miss America should have been Indian-American.

Teacher Question 4: What other diversity aspects might play into this issue?

Student: SES [Socioeconomic Status]. It takes a lot of money to be Miss America; go through all the pageants, travel...

Student: What about sexual orientation/transgender people?

Student: What about body size, appearance?

Student Questions: Are we speaking of opportunity based upon the person who can do it? What about people who are not interested in taking the opportunity. For me, that is the subjective nature of the word “opportunity.” For example, not all people want to go to college, even if they have the opportunity.

Teacher Question 5: Just because there is the opportunity to go to college, is there true access for all?

Student Question Can you say that opportunity means an equal chance to go to school, get that job, get that house?

Student Question: What do we mean by equal?

This sample Socratic dialogue demonstrates a line of questioning between the students and teacher. The discussion begins with a guiding, open-ended question, and
assumptions and limited perspectives expressed by the students are probed with additional Socratic questions by the teacher and the students. These additional questions are organic in nature and informed by the Universal Intellectual Standards. For example, Teacher Questions 1 and 2, *Whose opportunity? Is it more about my own opportunity?* demonstrate the Universal Intellectual Standard of Breadth, as they ask students to consider other perspectives. Teacher Question 5, *Just because there is the opportunity to go to college, is there true access for all?* demonstrates the Universal Intellectual Standard of Significance, as it focuses on important problems to consider. One student’s questions, *What do we consider equal? Does everyone have the same dream?* demonstrate Clarity and Accuracy in that examples and verification are desired. The Universal Intellectual Standards that were applied may also be used for self-reflection and assessment of strength and areas of growth.

**Socrates’ Café Self-Assessment Exit Ticket**

Students may self-assess their own performance within a Socrates Café discussion with a low-stakes formative assessment aimed at self-reflection of the critical elements of the Socrates Café and a proposed plan of growth for future Socrates Cafes. Following the Socrates Café, students gauge their own use of the elements of dialogue, Socratic Questioning, Intellectual Standards use, scholarliness, interactions and dispositions within the discussion. Subsequently, they devise a growth plan for each element for succeeding Socrates Cafes. As they exit the class, the self-assessment can be turned in anonymously or identified, depending on the teachers’ instructional goals. Table 1 demonstrates a sample self-assessment exit ticket.

**Table 1: Self-Assessment Exit Ticket for Socrates Café**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element of Socrates Café</th>
<th>Self-Assessment of My Performance</th>
<th>My Proposed Areas of Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dialogue</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I participated in the Socrates Café by engaging in dialogue.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socratic Questioning</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I participated in the Socrates Café by engaging in Socratic Questioning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use of Intellectual Standards</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I used varying levels of Socratic Questioning by addressing the Intellectual Standards.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scholarliness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I used the text or other readings to support my critical analysis of the issue.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interactions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I participated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and listened.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dispositions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I displayed respect for other’s positions. I displayed a problem-solving orientation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion**

The instructional framework and self-assessment presented in this article is only one way to scaffold and encourage self-assessment in critical thinking. Therefore, the framework does not fit every instructional goal for critical analysis. Nonetheless, this framework can easily be modified according to a wide range of developmental levels and content areas. Furthermore, similar strategies to enhance critical thinking have been extended to online, hybrid, and cooperative formats (Anderson & Piro, 2013; MacKnight, 2000; Piro & Anderson, 2013; Trufant, 2003; Yang, Newby, & Bill, 2005).

Organic, less-structured, and non-assessed opportunities to engage in Socratic questioning and dialogue may serve important purposes as well. Additionally, continuous self-reflection and professional development on the part of the facilitator and the students are necessary. Paul & Elder (2009) agree the art and skill of critical thinking via Socratic questioning and dialogue are consistently fostered and developed over time, and an extended goal is to develop essential intellectual traits as well (p. 14-15).

Calls for practices that enhance critical thinking will continue to increase as educators prepare K-12 and college students for success in our global society. Critical thinking discussions in a Socrates Café combine Socratic questioning, dialogue, and the Universal Intellectual Standards in order to provide a comfortable forum and a framework for students to systematically discuss and reason through complicated topics (Elder & Paul, 2007; Phillips, 2001). Self-assessment guidelines, such as the exemplar used in this article, can assist students to use the framework by reflecting and creating a growth plan to address the important elements of the Socrates Café: student dialogue, Socratic Questioning with a variety of the Universal Intellectual Standards (Elder & Paul, 2007), the application of readings, a focus on interactions between students, and dispositions supportive of respect and problem solving.

Gina Anderson, Ed.D.
Assoc. Professor & Coord., Curriculum & Instruction
TWU Dept. of Teacher Education
P.O. Box 425769
Denton, TX 76204
940-898-2980
ganderson@twu.edu
References


