RICHARD PAUL AND LINDA ELDER

The Thinker's Guide to SOCRATIC QUESTIONING

Based on Critical Thinking Concepts and Tools

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The Thinker's Guide to

THE ART OF

Based on *Critical Thinking Concepts & Tools*

A companion to:

The Thinker's Guide to Analytic Thinking

The Art of Asking Essential Questions

RICHARD PAUL and LINDA ELDER

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Introduction

The unexamined life is not worth living—Socrates

Socratic questioning is disciplined questioning that can be used to pursue thought in many directions and for many purposes, including: to explore complex ideas, to get to the truth of things, to open up issues and problems, to uncover assumptions, to analyze concepts, to distinguish what we know from what we don't know, and to follow out logical implications of thought. The key to distinguishing Socratic questioning from questioning per se is that Socratic questioning is *systematic, disciplined,* and *deep,* and usually focuses on foundational concepts, principles, theories, issues, or problems.

Teachers, students, or indeed anyone interested in probing thinking at a deep level can and should construct Socratic questions and engage in Socratic dialogue. When we use Socratic questioning in teaching, our purpose may be to probe student thinking, to determine the extent of their knowledge on a given topic, issue or subject, to model Socratic questioning for them, or to help them analyze a concept or line of reasoning. In the final analysis, we want students to learn the *discipline* of Socratic questioning, so that they begin to use it in reasoning through complex issues, in understanding and assessing the thinking of others, and in following-out the implications of what they, and others think.

In teaching, then, we can use Socratic questioning for at least two purposes:

1. To deeply probe student thinking, to help students begin to distinguish what they know or understand from what they do not know or understand (and to help them develop intellectual humility in the process).
2. To foster students' abilities to ask Socratic questions, to help students acquire the powerful tools of Socratic dialogue, so that they can use these tools in everyday life (in questioning themselves and others). To this end, we need to model the questioning strategies we want students to emulate and employ. Moreover, we need to directly teach students how to construct and ask deep questions. Beyond that, students need practice, practice, and more practice.

Socratic questioning teaches us the importance of questioning in learning (indeed Socrates himself thought that questioning was the only defensible form of teaching). It teaches us the difference between systematic and fragmented thinking. It teaches us to dig beneath the surface of our ideas. It teaches us the value of developing questioning minds in cultivating deep learning.

The art of Socratic questioning is intimately connected with critical thinking because the art of questioning is important to excellence of thought. What the word "Socratic" adds to the art of questioning is systematicity, depth, and an abiding interest in assessing the truth or plausibility of things.

Both critical thinking and Socratic questioning share a common end. Critical thinking provides the conceptual tools for understanding how the mind functions (in its pursuit of meaning and truth); and Socratic questioning employs those tools in framing questions essential to the pursuit of meaning and truth.

The goal of critical thinking is to establish an additional level of thinking to our thinking, a powerful inner voice of reason, that monitors, assesses, and reconstitutes—in a more rational direction—our thinking, feeling, and action. Socratic discussion cultivates that inner voice through an explicit focus on self-directed, disciplined questioning.

In this guide, we focus on the mechanics of Socratic dialogue, on the conceptual tools that critical thinking brings to Socratic dialogue, and on the importance of questioning in cultivating the disciplined mind. Through a critical thinking perspective, we offer a substantive, explicit, and rich understanding of Socratic questioning.

To get you started in practicing Socratic questioning, we begin with the nuts and bolts of critical thinking (Part One), followed by some examples of Socratic dialogue (Part Two), and then the mechanics of Socratic dialogue (Part Three). The fourth and fifth sections focus on the importance of questioning in teaching, the contribution of Socrates, and the link between Socratic questioning and critical thinking.

Part One

A Taxonomy of Socratic Questions

Based in Critical Thinking Concepts

To formulate questions that probe thinking in a disciplined and productive way, we need to understand thinking—how it works and how it should be assessed. It is critical thinking that provides the tools for doing this, for analyzing and assessing reasoning. This is why understanding critical thinking is essential to effective Socratic dialogue.

As teachers, then, we need to understand the conceptual tools that critical thinking brings to Socratic questioning, and we need to foster student understanding of them. In this section we focus briefly on the following foundational critical thinking concepts:

1. **Analyzing thought** (focusing on the parts of thinking)
2. Assessing thought (focusing on standards for thinking)
3. Analyzing questions by system (distinguishing between questions of preference, fact and judgment)
4. **Developing prior questions** (focusing on questions we would need to answer before we could answer more complex questions)
5. Identifying domains within complex questions (focusing on questions we would need to answer within different subject areas or disciplines to adequately address a complex issue)

When we actively use these critical thinking concepts in the questions we formulate and ask, we raise thinking to higher levels of understanding and quality.

Questions that Target the Parts of Thinking[1]

Using analytic questions in Socratic dialogue is foundational to understanding and probing reasoning. When we analyze, we break a whole into parts. We do this because problems in a "whole" are often a function of problems in one or more of its parts. Success in thinking depends on our ability to identify the components of thinking by asking questions focused on those components.

One powerful way to discipline questions, then, is to focus on the components of reasoning, or parts of thinking as illustrated by the following:

As you formulate questions, consider the following guidelines and sample questions:

1. **Questioning Goals and *Purposes*.** All thought reflects an agenda or purpose. Assume that you do not fully understand someone's thought (including your own)

[1] For a deeper understanding of the structures of thought, see *A Miniature Guide to the Foundation of Analytic Thinking,* by Linda Elder, and Richard Paul, 2005, Foundation For Critical Thinking, www.criticalthinking.org. Also see *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life,* by Richard Paul, and Linda Elder, 2006, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.

until you understand the agenda behind it. Some of the many questions that focus on purpose in thinking include:

- What is your purpose right now?
- What was your purpose when you made that comment?
- Why are you writing this? Who is your audience? What do you want to persuade them of?
- What is the purpose of this assignment?
- What are we trying to accomplish here?
- What is our central aim or task in this line of thought?
- What is the purpose of this chapter, relationship, policy, law?
- What is our central agenda? What other goals do we need to consider?

2. **Questioning *Questions*.** All thought is responsive to a question. Assume that you do not fully understand a thought until you understand the question that gives rise to it. Questions that focus on questions in thinking include:
   - I am not sure exactly what question you are raising. Could you explain it?
   - What are the main questions that guide the way you behave in this or that situation?
   - Is this question the best one to focus on at this point, or is there a more pressing question we need to address?

- Could you be more specific?
- Could you specify your allegations more fully?

3. **Questioning *Accuracy.*** Recognize that thinking is always more or less *accurate*. Assume that you have not fully assessed it except to the extent that you have checked to determine whether it represents things as they really are. Questions that focus on accuracy in thinking are:
   - How could we check that to see if it is true?
   - How could we verify these alleged facts?
   - Can we trust the accuracy of these data given the questionable source from which they come?
4. **Questioning *Relevance.*** Recognize that thinking is always capable of straying from the task, question, problem, or issue under consideration. Assume that you have not fully assessed thinking except to the extent that you have ensured that all considerations used in addressing it are genuinely *relevant* to it. Questions that focus on relevance in thinking are:
   - I don't see how what you said bears on the question. Could you show me how it is relevant?
   - Could you explain what you think the connection is between your question and the question we have focused on?
5. **Questioning *Depth.*** Recognize that thinking can either function at the surface of things or probe beneath that surface to deeper matters and issues. Assume that you have not fully assessed a line of thinking except to the extent that you have determined the *depth* required for the task at hand (and compared that with the depth that actually has been achieved). To figure out whether a question is deep, we need to determine whether it involves complexities that must be considered. Questions that focus on depth in thinking are:
   - Is this question simple or complex? Is it easy or difficult to answer?
   - What makes this a complex question?
   - How are we dealing with the complexities inherent in the question?
6. **Questioning *Breadth.*** Recognize that thinking can be more or less broad-minded (or narrow-minded) and that *breadth* of thinking requires the thinker to think insightfully within more than one point of view or frame of reference. Assume that you have not fully assessed a line of thinking except to the extent that you have determined how much breadth of thinking is required (and how much has in fact been exercised). Questions that focus on breadth in thinking are:
   - What points of view are relevant to this issue?
   - What relevant points of view have I ignored thus far?

- Am I failing to consider this issue from an opposing perspective because I am not open to changing my view?
- Have I entered the opposing views in good faith, or only enough to find flaws in them?
- I have looked at the question from an economic viewpoint. What is my ethical responsibility?
- I have considered a liberal position on the issue. What would conservatives say?

Questions That Help Us Assess Reasoning

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

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

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

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

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?

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?

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

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

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

The Art of Socratic Questioning Checklist

The following list can be used to foster disciplined questioning on the part of students. Students might take turns leading Socratic discussions in groups. During the process, some students might be asked to observe the students leading the discussion, and then afterwards provide feedback using the following guidelines (which all students should have a copy of during the discussion).

1. **Did the questioner respond to all answers with a further question?** _____

Keeping Participants Focused on The Elements of Thought

1. **Did the questioner make the *goal* of the discussion clear?** _____
   (What is the goal of this discussion? What are we trying to accomplish?)
2. **Did the questioner pursue relevant *information?*** _____
   (What information are you basing that comment on? What experience convinced you of this?)
3. **Did the questioner question *inferences,* interpretations, and conclusions where appropriate or significant?** _____
   (How did you reach that conclusion? Could you explain your reasoning? Is there another possible interpretation?)
4. **Did the questioner focus on key ideas or *concepts?*** _____
   (What is the main idea you are putting forth? Could you explain that idea?)
5. **Did the questioner note questionable *assumptions?*** _____
   (What exactly are you taking for granted here? Why are you assuming that?)
6. **Did the questioner question *implications* and consequences?** _____
   (What are you implying when you say…? Are you implying that…? If people accepted your conclusion, and then acted upon it, what implications might follow?)
7. **Did the questioner call attention to the *point of view* inherent in various answers?** _____
   (From what point of view are you looking at this? Is there another point of view we should consider?)
8. **Did the questioner keep the central *question* in focus?** _____
   (I am not sure exactly what question you are raising. Could you explain it? Remember that the question we are dealing with is…)
9. **Did the questioner call for a clarification of *context,* when necessary?** _____
   (Tell us more about the situation that has given rise to this problem. What was going on in this situation?)

Keeping Participants Focused on Systems For Thought

1. **Did the questioner distinguish *subjective* questions from factual questions, from those requiring reasoned judgment within conflicting viewpoints? _____**
   (Is the question calling for a subjective or personal choice? If so, let's make that choice in terms of our personal preferences. Or, is there a way to come up with a single correct answer to this question? Or, are we dealing with a question that would be answered differently within different points of view? If the latter, what is the best answer to the question, all things considered?)

2. **Did the questioner keep the participants aware of alternative ways to think about the problem? _____**
   (Can you give me another way to think about this problem?)

Keeping Participants Focused on Standards For Thought

1. **Did the questioner call for *clarification,* when necessary? _____**
   (Could you elaborate further on what you are saying? Could you give me an example or illustration of your point? Let me tell you what I understand you to be saying. Is my Interpretation correct?)

2. **Did the questioner call for more details or greater *precision,* when necessary? _____**
   (Could you give us more details about that? Could you specify your allegations more fully?)

3. **Did the questioner keep participants sensitive to the need to check facts and verify the *accuracy* of information? _____**
   (How could we check that to see if it is true? How could we verify these alleged facts?)

4. **Did the questioner 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? _____**
   (I don't see how what you said bears on the question. Could you explain what you think the connection is?)

5. **Did the questioner keep participants aware of the complexities in the question on the floor. Did the questioner ask participants to think deeply about *deep* issues? _____**
   (What makes this a complex question? How does your answer take into account the complexities in the question?)

6. **Did the questioner keep participants aware of multiple points of view when dealing with *broad* questions? _____**
   (We have looked at the question from an economic point of view. Now let's look at it from an ethical point of view. We have considered a liberal position on the issue, what would conservatives say? We have considered what you think about the situation, but what would your parents think?)

Keeping Participants Actively Engaged in the Discussion

1. **Did the questioner think aloud along with the participants? _____**
   (I understand you to be saying.... I think this is a very complex question, and so I am not sure how to answer this. I would summarize the discussion thus far in the following way....)
2. **Did the questioner allow sufficient time for the participants to formulate their answers? _____**
3. **Did the questioner ensure that every contribution was sufficiently dealt with in some way? _____**
4. **Did the questioner periodically summarize where the discussion was in accomplishing its agenda? What questions had been and what questions had not yet been answered? _____**
5. **Did the discussion proceed smoothly with the various contributions being effectively blended into an intelligible whole? _____**

Four Directions in Which to Pursue Thought

There is another way to classify, and so arrange in our minds, questions we can ask to help stimulate student thought. This approach emphasizes four directions in which thought can be pursued and presupposes the elements of reasoning. As you examine the following diagram, you will see that all of the elements of reasoning are accentuated—except the question at issue and the conceptual dimension of thought. (See the diagram on the next page.)

Asking One-System, No-System, and Conflicting-System Questions

There are a number of ways to categorize questions for the purpose of analysis. One way is to focus on the type of reasoning required by the question. With one-system questions, there is an established procedure or method for finding the answer. With no-system questions, the question is properly answered in accordance with one's subjective preference; there is no "correct" answer. With conflicting-system questions, there are multiple competing viewpoints from which, and within which, one might reasonably pursue an answer to the question. There are better and worse answers, but no verifiable "correct" ones, since these are matters about which even experts disagree (hence the "conflict" from system to system).

To determine which of these three types of questions we are dealing with (in any given case) we can ask the following procedure: Are there relevant facts we need to consider in answering the question? If so, then either the facts alone settle the question (and we are dealing with a question of procedure), or the facts can be interpreted in different ways (and the question is debatable). If there are no facts we need to consider, then it is a matter of personal preference. Remember, if a matter is not one of personal preference, then there must be some facts that bear on the question. If the facts settle the question, then it is a "one-system" procedural question.

We want students to become comfortable with this schema of question types, to come to understand it in such a way that eventually they use it intuitively in their thinking. We want them to learn to ask and responsibly answer questions of reasoned judgment, to recognize when a question is complex, and to learn how to work their way through those complexities.

Questions of Procedure (established- or one-system)

These include questions with an established procedure or method for finding the answer. These questions are settled by facts, by definition, or both. They are prominent in mathematics, as well as the physical and biological sciences. Examples:

- What is the boiling point of lead?
- What is the size of this room?
- What is the differential of this equation?
- How does the hard drive on a computer operate?
- What is the sum of 659 and 979?
- How is potato soup prepared, according to established Polish tradition?

Questions of Preference (no-system)

Questions with as many answers as there are different human preferences (a category in which subjective taste rules). Examples:

- Which would you prefer, a vacation in the mountains or one at the seashore?
- How do you like to wear your hair?

- Do you like to go to the opera?
- What color scheme do you prefer in your house?

Questions of Judgment (conflicting-systems)

Questions requiring reasoning, but with more than one arguable answer. These are questions that make sense to debate, questions with better-or-worse answers (well-supported and reasoned or poorly-supported and/or poorly-reasoned answers). Here we are seeking the best answer within a range of possibilities. We evaluate answers to such questions using universal intellectual standards such as breadth, depth, logicalness, and so forth. These questions are predominant in the human disciplines (history, philosophy, economics, sociology, art, and so on). Examples:

- How can we best address the most basic and significant economic problems of the nation today?
- What can be done to significantly reduce the number of people who become addicted to illegal drugs?
- How can we balance business interest and environmental preservation?
- Is abortion justifiable?
- How progressive should the tax system be?
- Should capital punishment be abolished?
- What is the best economic system for this particular country?

Many texts claim to foster critical thinking by teaching students to divide all statements into facts and opinions. When they do so, students fail to grasp the significance of dialogical thinking and reasoned judgment. When an issue is fundamentally a matter of fact (for example, "What is the weight of this block of wood?" or "What are the dimensions of this figure?"), there is no reason to argue about the answer; one should carry out the process that yields the correct answer. Sometimes this might require following complex procedures. In any case, weighing and measuring, the processes needed for the questions above, are not typically matters of debate.

On the other hand, questions that raise matters of mere opinion, such as "What sweater do you like better?" "What is your favorite color?" or "Where would you like to spend your vacation?", do not have a *correct* answer since they ask us merely to express our personal *preferences.*

However, most of the important issues we face in our lives are not exclusively matters of fact or matters of preference. Many require a new aspect: that we reason our way to conclusions while we take the reasoned perspectives of others into account. As teachers, we should be clear in encouraging students to distinguish these three different situations: the ones that call for facts alone, the ones that call for preference alone, and the ones that call for reasoned judgment. When, as members of a jury, we are called upon to come to a judgment of innocence or guilt, we do not settle questions of pure fact, and we are certainly not expected to express our subjective preferences.

Students certainly need to learn procedures for gathering facts, and they doubtless need to have opportunities to express their preferences, but their 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 and reasoning of their own within the framework of their own perspectives—while also considering the perspectives of relevant others. Their values and preferences will, of course, play a role in their perspectives and reasoning, but their perspectives should not be a matter of pure opinion or sheer preference. We should not believe in things or people just because we *want* to. We should have good reasons for our beliefs, except, of course, where it makes sense to have pure preferences. It makes sense, if you so choose, to prefer butterscotch to chocolate pudding, but it does *not* make sense to prefer taking advantage of people rather than respecting their rights.

In a Socratic dialogue, we can help students distinguish among questions of fact, preference, and judgment. To help students do this, consider the following types of questions we might ask during a dialogue.

- What type of question are we addressing?
- Is this a question with one right answer?
- Is it a question asking for our preference? In other words, can we answer it by simply saying what we like or want?
- On the other hand, is it a question that calls on us to use reasoned judgment to come to a conclusion? In other words, is it a question that allows for more than one reasonable way to answer it? If so, and before we answer the question, what viewpoints are important to consider? Which viewpoints are more reasonable, given the evidence?

Questioning Questions: Identifying Prior Questions

Whenever we are dealing with complex questions, one tool useful in disciplining our thinking is that of identifying questions presupposed in a question that is our direct concern. In other words, because questions often presuppose other questions having been answered, it is often useful to prepare to answer a question by figuring out what "prior" questions it assumes, or, alternatively, what other questions it would be helpful for us to answer first, before we try to answer the immediate question at issue. This is especially important when dealing with complex questions. In other words, it is useful to approach a complex question by first formulating and then answering simple questions embedded in the question, questions we must answer before trying to answer the larger, more complex question.

Hence, to answer the question "What is multiculturalism?" it would be helpful to first settle the question, "What is culture?" And to settle that question, it would be helpful to answer the question, "What are the factors about a person (nationality, religion, ideology, place of birth, and so forth) that determine what culture he or she belongs to?"

To construct a list of prior questions, begin by writing down the main question you are focused on. Then formulate as many questions as you can think of that you would have to answer, or it would be helpful to answer, before answering the first. Then take this list

and determine what question or questions you would have to answer, or it would be helpful to answer, prior to answering these questions. Continue, following the same procedure for every new set of questions on your list.

As you proceed to construct your list, keep your attention focused on the first question on the list as well as on the last. If you do this, you should end up with a list of questions that shed light on the logic of the first question.

As an example of how to construct logically prior questions, consider this list of questions we would need to answer to address the larger question, "What is history?"

- What do historians write about?
- What is "the past?"
- Is it possible to include all of the past in a history book?
- How many of the events during a given time period are generally excluded in a history of that period?
- Is more information excluded than is included?
- How does a historian know what to emphasize?
- Do historians make value judgments in deciding what to include and what to leave out?
- What variables might influence a historian's viewpoint?
- Is it possible to simply list facts in a history book, or does all history writing involve interpretations as well as facts?
- Is it possible to decide what facts to include and exclude without adopting a historical point of view?
- How should we judge a historical interpretation?
- How should we judge a historical point of view?

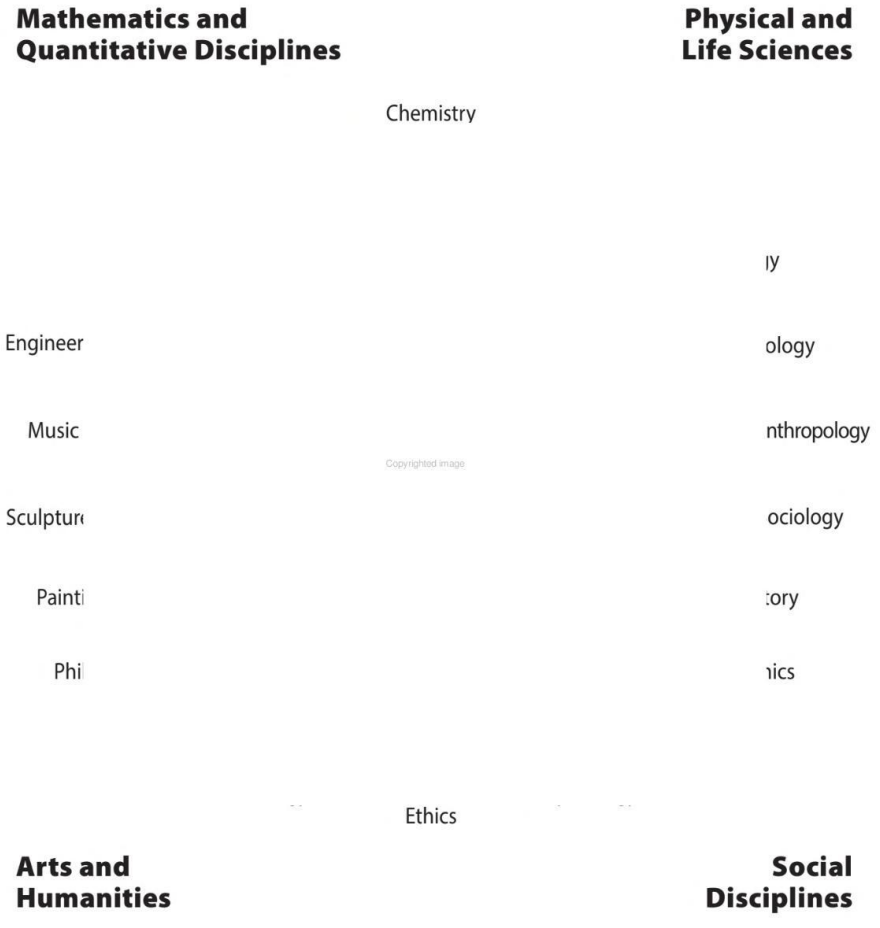
Asking Complex Interdisciplinary Questions

When addressing a complex question covering more than one domain of thought, make each domain explicit. Does the question, for example, include an economic dimension? Does it include a biological, sociological, cultural, political, ethical, psychological, religious, historical, or some other dimension? For each dimension of thinking inherent in the question, formulate questions that force you to consider complexities you otherwise may miss.

When focusing on domains within questions, consider such questions as:

- What are the domains of thinking inherent in this complex question?
- Am I dealing with all the relevant domains within the question?
- Are we leaving out some important domains?

The following figure shows some of the domains that might be embedded in a complex question:



Domains of Questions *(by discipline)*

This diagram was adapted from a diagram created by John Trapasso.

Part Two

Socratic Questioning Transcripts

In this section, we provide four sample transcripts of Socratic dialogues. Each discussion focuses on helping students think critically about a concept or issue.

As you read through these transcripts, keep in mind the critical thinking concepts and tools we introduced in the previous section. Note the "intellectual moves" being made at each point in these dialogues—many of which we point out in parentheses.

Once you read through each of the transcripts—and we recommend that you read them aloud and dramatize them by your mode of reading—hopefully, you will then be motivated to read something of the history and theory of Socratic questioning in the next three sections. However, remember, the theory behind Socratic questioning is important only if it inspires you to learn how to question more systematically and deeply.

In short, Socratic questioning is a discussion:

1. led by a person who does nothing but ask questions,
2. that is systematic and disciplined (it is not a free-for-all),
3. wherein the leader directs the discussion by the questions he/she asks,
4. wherein everyone participating is helped to go beneath the surface of what is being discussed, to probe into the complexities of one or more fundamental ideas or questions.

As soon as you can, we suggest that you get some experience in leading a Socratic discussion. Follow these initial rules:

1. Pass out a transcript of one of the Socratic discussions in this section to your students. Dramatize the transcript by reading it aloud with your students. To do this, assign students to read the "student" parts of the transcript. You read the part of the teacher/questioner.
2. Make a list of questions that focus on a central idea you would like students to master (See pages 51–54 for sample lists).
3. Tell your students you want to try out what is called Socratic questioning and that you are just beginning, so you want them to help you in the process.
4. When leading a Socratic dialogue, tell your students that by the rules of Socratic questioning you are allowed only to ask questions. You are not allowed to answer any questions, except by asking another question.
5. Tell students that their job is to attempt to answer the questions you ask.
6. Think aloud as you lead the discussion. Don't rush. Base each of your questions on the answer given by the last student.
7. Take seriously every answer that is given. Make sure it is clarified so that everyone in class understands it.

8. Periodically, summarize what the class has figured out (by their answers). Also, indicate what you have not yet figured out.

Don't be surprised if your first attempts fall short of the mark. Be patient with yourself and your students. Skilled questioning requires patience and practice. Both you and your students must exercise patience. Both you and your students must practice.

Transcript One

Exploring the Mind and How it Works

(Elementary School)

The following is a transcript of a 4th grade exploratory Socratic discussion. The discussion leader was with these particular students for the first time. The purpose was to determine how these children thought about a broad topic—the mind and how it works. The students were eager to respond and often seemed to articulate responses that reflected potential insights into the character of the human mind, the forces that shape us, the influence of parents and peer group, the nature of ethics, and of sociocentric bias. The insights are disjointed, of course, but the questions that elicited them and the responses that articulated them could be used as the basis for future discussions or assignments that deepen students' understanding of the mind and how it works.

While reading the transcript that follows, you may want to formulate questions that could have been asked but were not; student responses that could have been followed up, or other directions the discussion might have taken. Other ways to approach the manuscript would include explaining the function of each question or categorizing the questions.

Teacher: How does your mind work? Where's your mind?
Student: In your head. (Numerous students point to their heads)

T: Does your mind do anything? (Exploring the Concept of "Mind")
S: It helps you remember and think.
S: It helps, like, if you want to move your legs. It sends a message down to them.
S: This side of your mind controls this side of your body, and that side controls this other side.
S: When you touch a hot oven it tells you whether to cry or say ouch!

T: Does it tell you when to be sad and when to be happy? How does your mind know when to be happy and when to be sad? (Questioning for Clarification and Probing Implications)
S: When you're hurt it tells you to be sad.
S: If something is happening around you that makes you sad.
S: If there is lightning and you are scared.
S: If you get something you want.
S: It makes your body operate. It's like a machine that operates your body.

T: Does it ever happen that two people are in the same circumstance, but one is happy and the other is sad? Even though they are in exactly the same circumstance? (Exploring Viewpoints or Perspectives)
S: You get the same toy. One person might like it. The other gets the same toy and he doesn't like the toy.

T: Well, but I'm not sure of the difference between who you are and who people think you are. Could you be a good person and people think you bad? Is that possible? (Clarifying Concepts and Probing Implications)

S: Yeah, because you could try to be good. I mean, a lot of people think this one person's really smart, but this other person doesn't have nice clothes, but she tries really hard and people don't want to be around her.

T: So sometimes people think somebody is real good and they're not, and sometimes people think that somebody is real bad and they're not. Like if you were a crook, would you let everyone know you're a crook? (Probing Interpretations and Implications)

S [chorus]: NO!

T: So some people are really good at hiding what they are really like. Some people might have a good reputation and be bad; some people might have a bad reputation and be good. (Questioning for Clarification)

S: Like, everyone might think you were good, but you might be going on dope or something.

S: Does reputation mean that if you have a good reputation you want to keep it just like that? Do you always want to be good for the rest of your life?

T: I'm not sure… (Clarification)

S: So if you have a good reputation you try to be good all the time, don't mess up, and don't do nothing?

T: Suppose somebody is trying to be good just to get a good reputation—why are they trying to be good? (Probing Reasons and Concepts)

S: So they can get something they want and they don't want other people to have?

S: They might be shy and just want to be left alone.

S: You can't tell a book by how it's covered.

T: Yes, some people are concerned more with their cover than their book. Now let me ask you another question. So, if it's true that we all have a mind and our mind helps us to figure out the world, and we are influenced by our parents and the people around us, and sometimes we choose to do good things and sometimes we choose to do bad things, sometimes people say things about us and so forth and so on…Let me ask you: Are there some bad people in this world? (Probing Implications)

S: Yeah.

S: Terrorists and stuff.

S: Night-stalkers.

S: Hijackers.

S: Robbers.

could have been pursued and clarified by asking students why the examples they gave were examples of "bad" people. Students may then have been able to suggest tentative generalizations, which could have been tested and probed through further questioning. Rather than exploring the influence of perspective on evaluation, the teacher might have probed the idea, expressed by one student, that no one is "really bad." The student could have been asked to explain the remark, and other students could have been asked for their responses to the idea. In these cases and others, the teacher has a choice between any number of equally thought provoking questions. No single question is the "right" question in a Socratic dialogue.

Realize, then, that Socratic questioning is flexible. The questions asked at any given point will depend on how students respond to the questions, what ideas the teacher wants to pursue, and what questions occur to the teacher during the discussion. Remember that Socratic questions generally raise basic issues, probe beneath the surface of things, and pursue problematic areas of thought.

