

Learning the elements of inquiry



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ANALOGY: A comparison between two or more things that are somehow similar for the purpose of explanation or clarification. Though analogies cannot serve as proof, they can help illustrate, concretize or simplify a position by illuminating unknown or confusing elements.

EXAMPLE: “Finding happiness is like chasing down a bus—you don’t know if you’ll reach it so you better enjoy the journey.”

ASSUMPTION: A principle, premise or idea on which an opinion is based. Usually, assumptions are accepted as true implicitly, without proof. Identifying assumptions involves seeking what is implied or taken for granted in a position in order to avoid thinking errors and become more critical of knowledge sources.

EXAMPLE: “All teenagers in Quebec are lazy so that’s why the school dropout rate is so bad.”

CLARIFICATION: The action of making a statement more accessible and comprehensible. Since it can be difficult to precisely express an idea or position during a live inquiry, other community members can help with the clarifying process by reformulating the idea, offering an example or analogy, or defining the terms in the statement.

EXAMPLE: —“Thinking is about relations.”—“Do you mean that when we’re thinking, it’s like we’re creating a web of ideas that are interconnected then showing how they relate to one another?”—“Exactly!”

CONSEQUENCE: The outcome of an action, situation or condition. Imagining the consequences of a position helps to push an inquiry forward: a position can seem valid until the negative consequences are pinpointed; conversely, a position can gain in value if the positive consequences are unveiled.

EXAMPLE: —“What would happen if everyone on earth achieved the American Dream?”—“We’d likely run out of resources.”

CONTEXT: The circumstances that form the setting for a statement or idea, in terms of which it can be understood and assessed. Considering the context means taking into account the different circumstances in which a position may apply.

EXAMPLE: —“Waiting your turn is important in a grocery store but in a hospital, emergency cases should be prioritized.”

COUNTER-EXAMPLE: An exception to a proposed idea or position. Counter-examples can help to challenge generalizations or contradict an argument by highlighting a case or particularity that conflicts or stands out. Identifying counter-examples contributes to avoiding sweeping assertions or blanket statements.

EXAMPLE: —“All animals in the ocean are fish.”—“What about a whale? Or a dolphin? They’re mammals, not fish.”

CRITERIA: The defining characteristics of something; a principle or standard by which something may be judged or decided. Crucial to critical thinking, criteria help to support reasoning in favour of a particular position. Criteria also help in the elaboration of precise definitions for key terms by underlining the essential properties that uniquely identify them.

EXAMPLE: “For a creative work to be considered art, it has to be original, express meaning and hold emotional power.”

DEFINITION: An exact statement or description of the nature, scope or meaning of something. By avoiding circular logic and ambiguity, definitions help clarify the way key terms are used in a question or statement to ensure community members are approaching their inquiry with the same meanings in mind. Definitions determine the boundaries of terms and reflect their connotations by specifying relevant criteria.

EXAMPLE: “Racism involves: first, thinking there are different races of humans; second believing some of these races are better than others; third, acting in a way that confirms this belief by treating the ‘superior’ races better than the ‘inferior’ races.”

DISTINCTION: A difference, separation or contrast between two or more things. Distinctions play an important role in specifying definitions by underlining a unique, relevant property and narrowing down the concepts or circumstances under consideration.

EXAMPLE: “There’s a difference between killing someone and letting someone die—in the first case, you’re directly causing the death to happen; in the second case, you’re not intervening to stop the death from happening.”

DOUBT: A sense of uncertainty or lack of conviction about the truth, fact or existence of something. Doubt is a critical activity in a community of inquiry: it involves bracketing personal beliefs, accepting fallibility and adopting a humble attitude by questioning assumptions and biases. Doubt leads to more reasonable, critical judgments.

EXAMPLE: —“Being free is about doing whatever you want.”—“I’m not sure about that. . . I’m wondering if that’s really true. What if you want to do something you’re incapable of doing? Like flying? Maybe being free isn’t that simple...”

EXAMPLE: A characterizing element of something that illustrates or epitomizes it well. Finding an example consists in identifying a particular case that can serve as a rule, model or principle to help concretize an idea or position with specific detail. Good examples can illustrate, clarify and even justify a viewpoint.

EXAMPLE: —“People are always trying to control our choices.”—“Like who? Under what circumstances?”—“Take the advertising industry. Its whole mission is to influence our decisions with cool pictures so we buy a company’s products.”

HYPOTHESIS: A proposed explanation made on the basis of limited evidence as a starting point for further inquiry. Hypotheses prompt the search for proof: if relevant supporting evidence is discovered, the hypothesis gains value; if no evidence materializes, the hypothesis is abandoned. Rather than presume certainty, a hypothesis encourages possibility, allowing deeper examination of ideas and opinions that may otherwise be too quickly dismissed.

EXAMPLE: “I’d like to suggest that one possible explanation for apathy towards the environment is that people feel overwhelmed by how bad things are and don’t know what to do to fix them, so they just stop caring.”

INTERPRETATION: The action of explaining or construing the meaning of something. Interpreting requires creative thinking: it involves creating meaning by attempting to explain or translate the significance, value or spirit of an idea or position. Interpretations can vary in style and content as they rely heavily on personal experience—beliefs, culture, personality, knowledge, values, etc.

EXAMPLE: —“I think the character in the film felt shame because he believes that lack of knowledge is the same as lack of intelligence.”—“That’s interesting but I think that he probably felt shame because everyone laughed at him. If they hadn’t laughed, maybe he wouldn’t even have noticed his error.”

METACOGNITION: Awareness and understanding of one’s own thought processes. Reflecting on the act of thinking involves examining and evaluating the inquiry tools to determine whether their use will help or hinder the dialogue.

EXAMPLE: —“If I reflect on our thinking so far, I think we need to define our terms before we continue.”

REASON: A cause, explanation or justification for something. Reasons help support a proposed position in order to persuade other community of inquiry members of its potential and quality. Not all reasons are created equal: they must be evaluated for their validity and relevance through rigorous analysis. Good reasons transform a mere uninformed opinion into a rational, substantiated argument.

EXAMPLE: “I don’t think that animals should have rights because they can’t participate in society. . . they can’t exercise their rights the same way that humans can through reasoning and deliberating. Accordingly, we owe them care but not rights.”

REFORMULATION: The action of expressing an idea, thought or theory in a new or different way. Reformulating is an essential part of caring thinking in a community of inquiry: one member can help push an inquiry forward by paraphrasing another’s idea or verifying it with an alternative explanation. Clarification questions are often reformulations as they seek to shed light on a viewpoint by re-articulating it in question form.

EXAMPLE: —“I don’t think gender exists.”—“Do you mean that society encourages the development of certain differences in boys and girls as they grow up?”—“Right. We learn gender roles: they’re a social construct; we’re not born with them.”

SELF-CORRECTION: The action of correcting oneself—both in content and process—without external help. Self-correction involves recognizing thinking errors, accepting criticism, rectifying mistakes, modifying viewpoints in light of new evidence and changing one’s mind when reasonable to do so.

EXAMPLE:—“I think only humans are capable of thinking because we’re the only intelligent species.”—“What about beavers that build their own dams?”—“That’s just instinct!”—“I don’t agree: if it was just instinct, they’d always build dams the same way but that’s not the case. They must be thinking on some level.”—“That’s true, I hadn’t thought of that. I’ll have to revise my position about the link between thinking and intelligence.”