Questions for a Socratic Dialogue

Recently, R.W. Paul’s six types of Socratic Questions were expanded to nine types. These questions are reproduced with permission from the Foundation for Critical Thinking. For a more complete description of Socratic Questioning, see The Thinker’s Guide to the Art of Socratic Questioning (2006), by Richard Paul and Linda Elder. Details may be found at www.criticalthinking.org.

Questions of Clarification

• What do you mean by _______?
• What is your main point _______?
• How does _______ relate to _______?
• Could you put that another way?
• What do you think is the main issue here?
• Is your basic point _______ or _______?
• Could you give me an example?
• Would this be an example: _______?
• Could you explain that further?
• Would you say more about that?
• Why do you say that?
• Let me see if I understand you; do you mean _______ or _______?
• How does this relate to our discussion/problem/issue?
• What do you think John meant by his remark? What did you take John to mean?
• Jane, would you summarize in your own words what Richard has said? Richard, is that what you meant?

Questions That Probe Purpose

• What is the purpose of _______?
• What was your purpose when you said _______?
• How do the purposes of these two people vary?
• How do the purposes of these two groups vary?
• What is the purpose of the main character in this story?
• How did the purpose of this character change during the story?
• Was this purpose justifiable?
• What is the purpose of addressing this question at this time?

Questions That Probe Assumptions

• What are you assuming?
• What is Karen assuming?
• What could we assume instead?
• You seem to be assuming __________. Do I understand you correctly?
• All of your reasoning depends on the idea that __________. Why have you based your reasoning on __________ rather than __________?
• You seem to be assuming __________. How would you justify taking this for granted?
• Is it always the case? Why do you think the assumption holds here?

Questions That Probe Information, Reasons, Evidence, and Causes

• What would be an example?
• How do you know?
• What are your reasons for saying that?
• Why did you say that?
• What other information do we need to know before we can address this question?
• Why do you think that is true?
• Could you explain your reasons to us?
• What led you to that belief?
• Is this good evidence for believing that?
• Do you have any evidence to support your assertion?
• Are those reasons adequate?
• How does that information apply to this case?
• Is there reason to doubt that evidence?
• What difference does that make?
• Who is in a position to know if that is the case?
• What would convince you otherwise?
• What would you say to someone who said __________?
• What accounts for __________?
• What do you think is the cause?
• How did this come about?
• By what reasoning did you come to that conclusion?
• How could we go about finding out whether that is true?
• Can someone else give evidence to support that response?

Questions about Viewpoints or Perspectives

• You seem to be approaching this issue from __________ perspective. Why have you chosen this perspective rather than that perspective?
• How would other groups or types of people respond? Why? What would influence them?
• How could you answer the objection that __________ would make?
• Can/did anyone see this another way?
• What would someone who disagrees say?
• What is an alternative?
• How are Ken’s and Roxanne’s ideas alike? Different?

Questions That Probe Implications and Consequences

• What are you implying by that?
• When you say ______, are you implying ______?
• But if that happened, what else would also happen as a result? Why?
• What effect would that have?
• Would that necessarily happen or only probably happen?
• What is an alternative?
• If this and this are the case, then what else must be true?

Questions about the Question

• How can we find out?
• Is this the same issue as ______?
• How could someone settle this question?
• Can we break this question down at all?
• Is the question clear? Do we understand it?
• How would ______ put the issue?
• Is this question easy or difficult to answer? Why?
• What does this question assume?
• Would ______ put the question differently?
• Why is this question important?
• Does this question ask us to evaluate something?
• Do we need facts to answer this?
• Do we all agree that this is the question?
• To answer this question, what other questions would we have to answer first?
• I’m not sure I understand how you are interpreting the main question at issue. Could you explain your interpretation?

Questions That Probe Concepts

• What is the main idea we are dealing with?
• Why/how is this idea important?
• Do these two ideas conflict? If so, how?
• What was the main idea guiding the thinking of the character in this story?
• How is this idea guiding our thinking as we try to reason through this issue? Is this idea causing us problems?
• What main theories do we need to consider in figuring out ______?
• Are you using this term “_______” in keeping with educated usage?
• Which main distinctions should we draw in reasoning through this problem?
• Which idea is this author using in her or his thinking? This there a problem with it?

Questions That Probe Inferences and Interpretations

• Which conclusions are we coming to about ______?  
• On what information are we basing this conclusion?  
• Is there a more logical inference we might make in this situation?  
• How are you interpreting her behavior? Is there another possible interpretation?  
• What do you think of ______?  
• How did you reach that conclusion?  
• Given all the facts, what is the best possible conclusion?  
• How shall we interpret these data?