

## Focus Your Questions on Prior Questions

Whenever we are dealing with complex questions, another tool that is useful in disciplining our thinking is to construct prior questions—questions we need to answer before we can answer a more complex question. Hence, to answer the question, “What is multiculturalism?” we should be able first to settle the question, “What is culture?” To settle that question, we should settle the question, “What are the factors about a person that determine what culture he or she belongs to?” When you learn to formulate and pursue prior questions, you have another important “idea” you can use to develop your ability to learn in any context.

To construct a list of prior questions, simply write down the main question upon which you are going to focus your discussion and then formulate as many questions as you can think of that you would have to answer before you could answer the first. Then determine from this list what question you would have to answer to answer these questions. Continue following the same procedure for every new set of questions on your list.

As you construct your list, keep your attention focused on the first question on the list as well as on the last. If you do this well, you should end up with a list of questions that probe 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 left out in a history of that time period?
- Is more left out 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?
- Is it possible simply to list facts in a history book, or does all history writing involve interpretations as well as facts?
- Is it possible to decide what to include and exclude and how to interpret facts without adopting a historical point of view?
- How can we begin to judge a historical interpretation?
- How can we begin to judge a historical point of view?

The best questions are those that keep us focused on achieving our most significant goals and purposes.

When you have practiced formulating prior questions to complex questions, you will begin to develop a Socratic questioning tool you can use whenever you need to answer a complicated question. You will notice your mind coming up with questions that are inherent in other questions. You are unpacking questions to answer them better. You should also then begin to recognize when others are failing to consider the complexities in a question.

## 6.9 Think for Yourself

### CONSTRUCTING A LIST OF PRIOR QUESTIONS

Formulate a complex question to which you would like to find an answer. Then use the procedure of constructing prior questions until you have a list of at least 10 questions. Afterward, see if you have gained insight into how the first question has to be thought through in light of the prior questions you formulated.

## Focus Your Questions on Domains of Thinking

When you are addressing a complex question that covers more than one domain of thought, you can target your prior questions by figuring out the domains of thinking inherent in the question. Does the complex 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, you can formulate questions that force you to consider complexities you otherwise may miss. Consider the following question, some of the domains imbedded in the question, and some of the questions imbedded in those domains.

Complex question: What can be done about the number of people who abuse illegal drugs?

Domains inherent in the question, along with some questions we would have to address within each domain before we could answer our complex question, are:

1. Economic
  - What economic forces support drug use?
  - What can be done to minimize the influence of money involved in drug sales?
2. Political
  - What possible solutions to drug abuse are politically unacceptable?
  - Are there any realistic solutions that the power structure would accept?
  - To what extent does the political structure exacerbate the problem?
3. Social/Sociological
  - What social structures and practices support drug abuse?
  - How does gang membership contribute to drug abuse?
  - How does membership within any group contribute to the problem or, conversely, insulate group members from abusing drugs?
4. Psychological
  - How do factors such as stress, individual personality differences, and childhood traumas support drug abuse?
  - What role, if any, does human irrationality play in drug abuse?