Critical Inquiry Roles in Groups

One strategy for fostering productive student group work is to assign students to inquiry roles. An inquiry role tasks a student with a particular focus and contribution to make to the group's collective work. Such roles can be based on specific aspects of reasoning, forms of argumentation, or types of questioning – important skills that students can practice in the group as preparation for formal assessments such as papers, projects, etc.

For example, if students will be writing a paper (or short essay on an exam) in which they need to summarize an idea or view and the evidence that supports it, explain counter-arguments and evidence, note gaps in reasoning, identify unanswered questions, support or reject the idea or view and explain why, and so forth, such elements of the paper can be used as the inquiry roles in a group. So, one student is the summarizer, one or two others are devil's advocate and provide counter-arguments, another tracks gaps or unanswered questions, and so on. In this way, students are practicing what is expected of them for an assignment. Including a group debrief and individual reflections about what they learned regarding the different roles, can help students solidify their understanding.

In any case, there are a variety of inquiry roles one can use – again, having them grounded in student work and the skills or knowledge they will need to demonstrate, is most helpful in aligning the group process with an assessment. So, in choosing the kinds of inquiry roles you want students to take on and practice, identify what is most relevant for students to know or be able to do in order to demonstrate their learning in your course.

Below are some possible inquiry role ideas. The first table, "Sample Task Prompts," lists a variety of question types – or roles – and their purpose and how a student might begin to formulate a response to a given problem, issue, situation, etc. Not all question types may be relevant, and students might also have more than type or role in their group.

Similarly, the second example, "The Ultimate Cheatsheet for Critical Thinking," indicates a variety of key questions that could form the basis for inquiry roles – here we indicate how this could work as a "multilogue team" of students who prepare a presentation or synopsis based on the cheatsheet (a "monologue" variation is also noted).

The third example is taken from a TEP workshop on active learning, in which faculty participants take on basic roles to think through the pluses and minuses of active learning. A similar kind of format can be used for a variety of ideas or processes that one might introduce in a lecture and have students engage as a group in a discussion board.

In all the examples that follow, the student group produces an artifact for others to engage in some manner, based on key aspects of inquiry relevant to the course and which students should be learning to meet course objectives. In this way, students practice what they need to know or be able to do, using given content, and teach each other in the process.

EXHIBIT 4.1

Sample Task Prompts

Question Type	Purpose	Example
Exploratory	Probe facts and basic knowledge	What research evidence supports ____?
Challenge	Examine assumptions, conclusions, and interpretations	How else might we account for ____?
Relational	Ask for comparison of themes, ideas, or issues	How does ____compare to ____?
Diagnostic	Probe motives or causes	Why did ____?
Action	Call for a conclusion or action	In response to ____, what should ____ do?
Cause and effect	Ask for causal relationships between ideas, actions, or events	If ____occurred, what would happen?
Extension	Expand the discussion	What are additional ways that ____?
Hypothetical	Pose a change in the facts or issues	Suppose ____ had been the case, would the outcome have been the same?
Priority	Seek to identify the most important issue	From all that we have discussed, what is the most important____?
Summary	Elicit syntheses	What themes or lessons have emerged from ____?
Problem	Challenge students to find solutions to real or hypothetical situations	What if? (To be motivating, students should be able to make some progress on finding a solution, and there should be more than one solution.)
Interpretation	Help students to uncover the underlying meaning of things	From whose viewpoint or perspective are we seeing, hearing, reading? What does this mean? or, What may have been intended by . . . ?
Application	Probe for relationships and ask students to connect theory to practice	How does this apply to that? or, Knowing this, how would you . . . ?
Evaluative	Require students to assess and make judgments	Which of these are better? Why does it matter? and, So what?
Critical	Require students to examine the validity of statements, arguments, and conclusions and to analyze their thinking and challenge their own assumptions	How do we know? and, What's the evidence and how reliable is the evidence?

Source: Davis, 1993, pp. 83–84; McKeachie, 1999, pp. 51–52

Example: **Monologues**

How it works: At the beginning of each class, a few students each present a 3-4 minute **monologue** that provides a critical response or engagement with a major topic, theme, or reading for the day or week. They could be personal narratives, follow a script (such as "describe, analyze, apply"), or answer guided questions or prompts (such as "The Ultimate Cheatsheet for Critical Thinking").

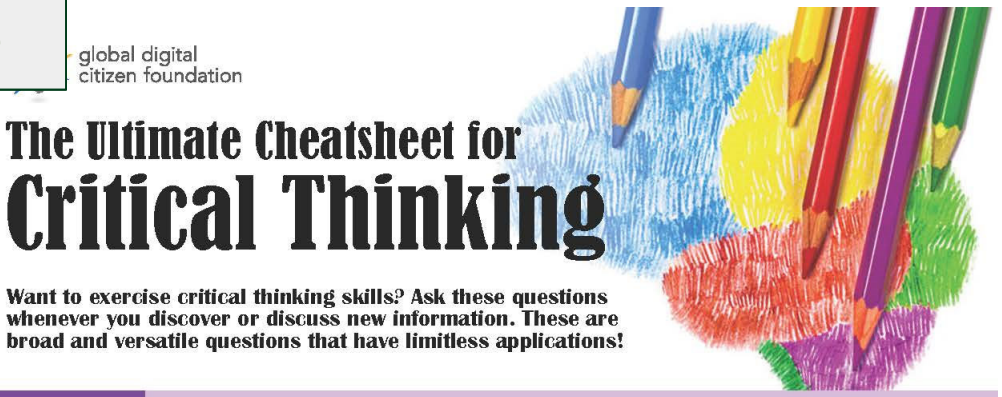
How it is assessed: Monologues can be assessed for clarity, relevance, organization, use of evidence, etc. and include peer assessment or feedback, and be used to frame classroom discussion or online discussion threads (with their own assessment process).

After life: Monologues can be compiled into a class portfolio that students take with them for future reference (and can be used by the instructor in future classes as texts for analysis or discussion).

Variation: **Tag Team Multilogue**

A group of three or six students work as a "multilogue team," with each student responsible for answering two (groups of 3) or one (groups of 6) of the six questions on "The Ultimate Cheatsheet for Critical Thinking."

Students engage in critical inquiry together, and the entire class receives a comprehensive, critical synopses for each major topic or theme. These in turn can form a starting point for more complex discussions (e.g. jigsaws) or detailed research projects.



Who	... benefits from this? ... is this harmful to? ... makes decisions about this? ... is most directly affected?	... have you also heard discuss this? ... would be the best person to consult? ... will be the key people in this? ... deserves recognition for this?
What	... are the strengths/weaknesses? ... is another perspective? ... is another alternative? ... would be a counter-argument?	... is the best/worst case scenario? ... is most/least important? ... can we do to make a positive change? ... is getting in the way of our action?
Where	... would we see this in the real world? ... are there similar concepts/situations? ... is there the most need for this? ... in the world would this be a problem?	... can we get more information? ... do we go for help with this? ... will this idea take us? ... are the areas for improvement?
When	... is this acceptable/unacceptable? ... would this benefit our society? ... would this cause a problem? ... is the best time to take action?	... will we know we've succeeded? ... has this played a part in our history? ... can we expect this to change? ... should we ask for help with this?
Why	... is this a problem/challenge? ... is it relevant to me/others? ... is this the best/worst scenario? ... are people influenced by this?	... should people know about this? ... has it been this way for so long? ... have we allowed this to happen? ... is there a need for this today?
How	... is this similar to _____? ... does this disrupt things? ... do we know the truth about this? ... will we approach this safely?	... does this benefit us/others? ... does this harm us/others? ... do we see this in the future? ... can we change this for our good?

Critical Inquiry Roles

At your table groups, assign the following roles for each other and, taking turns in the order below, discuss active learning and consider its **pluses** and **minuses**. Once you've all shared, use any remaining time for additional, open discussion.

- **Summarizer**: Summarize active learning for the group
- **Example-Giver**: Provide at least 2 specific examples of active learning
- **Proponent**: Offer at least 2 compelling reasons why active learning works -or- give 1 specific example of how it worked for you
- **Critic**: Offer at least 2 compelling reasons why active learning does not work -or- give 1 specific example of how it didn't work so well for you
- **Questioner**: Prepare at least 1 question to ask about active learning, based on your group discussion, and write it on the notecard provided
- **Additional persons**: be a proponent or critic and offer more reasons or examples