

Thinking Deeper



Social Issues, Problems, and Solutions

Critical Thinking Discussion Activities

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Introduction

Critical Thinking Discussion Activities

This collection of 53 copyable thinking/discussion activities features a wide variety of critically important contemporary social issues, problems, and solutions that affect every citizen of Planet Earth. It is aimed at a young adult and adult audience of English language learners at an intermediate and higher proficiency level. With some adaptation it can also be used selectively with middle school students.

For English language learners, there are two main purposes to these activities. First: Practicing English language skills, especially the skills of speaking and listening, in a conversation where learners also develop strategic competency as they engage in the back and forth of a discussion. Second: As the title suggests, learners are asked to think about the positions they will take as they do the activity. In today's world, more than ever, it is imperative that citizenry think beyond platitudes, slogans, and political promises, and have the opportunity to develop and explore their views on issues of local and global importance.

Although originally designed for English language learners, the simple design of the page and the procedures of the activities makes this photocopiable resource appropriate for a variety of classrooms including those where English is the first language and the main focus is the critical thinking objective.

User's Guide

Decide when to use this resource. These activities can supplement many themes of a class plan or curriculum. In addition to using an activity to occasionally supplement, this resource can be used independently with the teacher or the learners choosing an activity each week. Depending on learners' abilities to comprehend it and express themselves, and the time available in a class, an activity may take anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour or more.

Explain why. First and foremost, the users need to understand, putting it simply, why they are doing the activities. As part of your introduction, it may be helpful to give them a copy of the table of contents to increase their interest and motivation to engage in this wide variety of topics. It may also be helpful to have them prioritize the sequence of the activities.

Build schema. After selecting and copying an activity page, and even before handing it out, conduct a brief "What do you know about ..." to get things started. Of course, this can also be done as the page is handed out. Be sure to read through the discussion points to notice information that may need explanation.

Read the topic statement. Although you can have learners read the opening statement silently, there is some advantage to reading it aloud as they follow along or read aloud with you in a quiet voice. Then everyone is "on the same page" when you have finished reading, and they can be launched into using the scale to establish their points of view.

Read the discussion points (optional). The students are asked to rate the discussion points according to the scale. Depending on the proficiency level of the participants, it might be useful to read the discussion points aloud, soliciting questions about the vocabulary. You can also have the students take turns reading the discussion points aloud. Then everyone is ready to begin their prioritizing at the same time.

Rating the discussion points. It could be advisable to establish a time limit to this step so that all are ready to begin the discussion at about the same time.

Share and discuss. To give participants sufficient opportunity to express their ideas, working in small groups is helpful; groups of four usually work well. Students may also work in pairs. Set a time limit for the discussion. Give the participants a “two-minute warning” before wrapping up the activity.

A final step can be to have each group share some of what they discussed with the other groups.

Another way to wrap up is to take a class survey. You can collapse a ten-point scale by writing on the board “0-3” (low support or whatever), “4-6” (medium), and “7-10” (strong support or whatever). After listing the activity items you’d like to focus on, have students raise hands to show their level of support for each, and tally for each of the 3 scale groupings.

Research and/or write (optional). You can have learners write a brief summary of their positions on one or more of the points raised in the activities. Alternatively, you can provide internet address suggestions for a follow-up. The participants check the internet for homework, report the next day on what they found, or write a brief summary of what they found and how it did or didn’t affect their views.

*For the matching activity on Natural Disasters on page 18, after their discussion, students may want help with the answers:
1 d, 2 i, 3 j, 4 h, 5 k, 6 b, 7 a, 8 f, 9 e, 10 c, 11 g*