



Instructor Suggestions: Dialectical Thinking Classroom Activity

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Goals

Dialectical thinking can help people understand issues more completely and accurately, develop more effective solutions, have more productive dialogue, improve their relationships with people with whom they disagree, and increase their emotional stability and mental health. This worksheet aims to help people learn how to use dialectical thinking to explore a range of controversial, political, or academic topics.

Please feel free to use this worksheet in a flexible way based on the needs and constraints of your class. Below are some suggestions for using the worksheet.

A Read the first page of the sheet together as a class. Depending on the class, this can take 15–20 minutes.

1. Try to provide a concrete example or two as an exemplar that your students might have familiarity with (e.g., a current event). For example, you could ask them to think of a hypothetical child whose parents are getting divorced. What are some reasons this divorce might be good or bad for the family? Pros could include reducing conflict between the parents or helping the parents feel happier or more fulfilled, both of which can make them better parents. Cons could include the stress of the divorce process, the child's difficulty seeing both parents, and the sadness and stress to all involved. A more political example could also be helpful, such as Medicare for all. Pros are that everyone will have health insurance and similar programs have been successfully implemented in many countries. Cons are that it could be costly and inefficient (as most government programs are), implemented in a corrupt or unfair way, or that the country is too large or diverse to sustain such a program, all of which could lead to an increase in social divisions. Obviously, there's much more to say about both examples.

2. If you have time, you can ask your students for examples based on their experience to ensure that they understand the exercise before they begin. You can encourage students to provide examples from their personal lives, from academic readings, movies/fiction, or political controversies. Non-political examples may be especially useful as students gradually become acquainted with the concept. Take a few minutes for questions that may arise to make sure that everyone understands the general concept. A more detailed discussion can occur after the exercise is complete.

B Complete the practice exercise on page 2. If students complete this as small groups in class, it is estimated to take 15–30 minutes.

1. You can choose one topic for the entire class, or let students select different topics for different small groups. Students can pick any topic they choose for the exercise (carbon tax, amnesty for undocumented immigrants, affirmative action in university admissions, an assault weapon ban, etc.). They should feel free to select a topic that is more academic or related to your specific course.

2. Encourage your class to select a topic that will challenge them best. The ideal topic should be difficult for students without being too controversial for them to discuss productively. This will depend on the knowledge students have of

issues, their emotional maturity, their specific sensitivities, their desire to build their dialectical thinking ability, time limitations, and the interpersonal dynamics of the class.

3. We recommend this exercise be done in small groups of about 4-5 students. But, based on the size of your class and your time constraints, you can have students complete the assignment alone, together with the entire class, or as homework individually or in groups.





4. After students complete the exercise, you can ask them to share their responses with the class, or you can move to the next step.



Discuss the reflection questions. Discussing all of these questions as a class could take up to 30–60 minutes.

1. The reflection questions are a crucial way to help students build their ability to think dialectically. It's very important to take time to do this adequately.
2. To encourage students to share their experiences, try to foster a non-judgmental environment and verbally state that goal to the class. It may help to share some of your own emotional difficulties if you feel comfortable doing so. You can also encourage students to share any thoughts, feelings, associations, observations, or reflections they've had—even if they seem exaggerated, irrational, conflicting, or contrary to what they expected. This may help more students open up if they are having difficulty.
3. Strong feelings are expected. If students deny having difficulty with the exercise, encourage them to consider what other people might experience. You may even want them to consider how they can advocate for more dialectical thinking in the world.

Additional Tips

-  **Try to take a dialectical approach with students.** Acknowledge the truth in points they make, and then encourage discussion of the other side whenever possible. Modeling dialectical thinking can help them utilize the concept. This may mean acknowledging the downsides of thinking dialectically itself. After all, it is true that sometimes when moral choices are stark, ambivalence can be counterproductive (e.g., mass murder).
-  **Avoid arguing with students directly.** If they disagree, encourage them to try out this line of thinking. They're free to reject it if they so choose.
-  **Print out multiple copies of the sheet and complete more than one version of the exercise with students.** This could enhance their ability to think dialectically.
-  **Before the discussion, encourage students to write a 1–2-page response paper based on the reflection questions.** That may lead to a richer discussion. Reflection papers after the discussion may also help them consolidate the emotional and cognitive capacities involved in thinking dialectically.