



Discussion Guide

INTRODUCTION

“Seeking Disconfirmation” & “Challenging our Political Biases”

Created by William Reusch

Critical thinking is at the root of what education is about. Directing students into how to think, rather than what to think is how we help them grow into innovative, independent adults. Unfortunately, many classes in the traditional school model have replaced imagination with compliance. With the internet providing access to all the libraries in the world, memorizing information is becoming less and less valuable, but analyzing that data is become more and more valuable. Epistemology is often forgotten in school and that is doing our students a disservice.

Our nation has also become increasingly polarized. Due to new technology and media models, people are placed – willingly or not – into echo chambers of like-minded thinkers and, as a result, have difficulty understanding viewpoints that differ from their own.

Exercises like these help students challenge their own thinking and guide them down a pathway of deeper understanding of why they and others think the way they do. The focus can then shift from “blaming to aiming.” Individuals with opposing perspectives can thus have shared goals and work together on solutions -- as small as individual conflict resolution and as big as global crisis.

Included are a broad and a specific example of how to guide your students. How you implement these exercises is up to you. I have typically used these as individual assignments, as breaking down specific ideologies and perspectives can often feel like a personal journey. Instructors are encouraged to adapt them based on class size, structure, curriculum, and student age.

The “Seeking Disconfirmation” exercise asks students to choose a polarizing topic and examine their personal views on it. It can be used in nearly any class in any subject; for example, science, in the pursuit of truth, can have data corrupted by confirmation biases. Understanding various points of view is critical to literature. History's telling of who “good guys” and “bad guys” are can be challenged as well.

The “Challenging our Political Biases” exercise is a way of taking the principles of “Seeking Disconfirmation,” and applying them in more specific situations. Students are asked to think of the strongest arguments against their own beliefs, encouraging them to consider other viewpoints and their validity, even if they do not agree with those viewpoints.

Important Definitions

Straw Man Argument

A straw man is a form of argument and an informal fallacy based on giving the impression of refuting an opponent's argument, while actually refuting an argument not presented by that opponent. One who engages in this fallacy is said to be "attacking a straw man."

Steel Man Argument

The opposite of the straw man argument: the idea is to find the best form of the opponent's argument to test opposing opinions.
The goal should be to argue the opposing viewpoint better than your opponent even can!

Example 1

Person 1: "George Washington was a wonderful president."

Person 2: "No, he was a slave owner" (Straw man argument)

Person 2: "He chose not to run for a third term, won the electoral college unanimously, and released his slaves upon his death. During his farewell address he warned us of factions and died a celebrated hero. That being said, even within the historical context, I feel that the fact that he owned slaves negates him from being considered a 'wonderful' anything" (Steel man argument)

Example 2

Person 1: "Abortion should be illegal."

Person 2: "What about in the case of incest or rape?" (Straw man argument, given the rarity of such cases.)

Person 2: "Science is very mixed about when life begins. I understand that those who support the "Pro-Life" side see the fetus as a human life, and when you view it that way, it makes sense to view it as murder. It is often an incredibly difficult decision for women and couples to make. While I feel this is an area that government should not have jurisdiction over, I see the fetus as reliant on the mother and see abortion as being her decision about what to do with her body, rather than murder." (Steel man argument)